

The Director, National and Community Broadcasting,  
Department of Communications and the Arts, Canberra, ACT

**Submission to the review of Australian broadcasting services in the Asia-Pacific.**

Lee Richard Duffield PhD, [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

This submission may be made public.

Dr Lee Duffield is a journalist and researcher, and Media Editor of the online publication *Independent Australia*, [www.independentaustralia.net](http://www.independentaustralia.net). He was for over 20 years a journalist with Australian ABC, including time as the first news editor on the national youth radio network Triple-Jay, and European Correspondent at the fall of the Berlin Wall. He was later a Senior Lecturer at the Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, where he published extensively, with research interests in new media, media in Europe and development news with special interests in the Asia-Pacific.

**Introduction**

This submission affirms the pre-eminence of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Radio Australia in Australian international media services, and supports a general extension of such services with the development of media formats.

Two leading arguments exist for a strong ABC-Radio Australia presence in Asia-Pacific regions both quintessential and definitional to journalism and broadcasting.

The first argument is to provide services in the spirit of free flow of information, which is the key rationale of media recognised in democratic societies.

Globalisation of life and media provides the rationale for this free flow to occur across frontiers – recording and reporting life’s experiences where the audiences are.

Often those services from the ABC will be filling a gap and making up for deficiencies and deficits outside of Australia.

The second argument, frequently melded together with the first, is to help people in very isolated circumstances to keep in touch with the world.

With media organisations now able to deploy many channels and different forms of media at once, that should be the model taken up for the Asia-Pacific: providing multiple diverse services and formats, global and local, to succeed in delivering a free flow and defeating isolation.

This submission is mainly concerned with the South Pacific where I have had a research focus as a Journalism academic over two decades. (*Reference, please see database, [https://eprints.qut.edu.au/view/person/Duffield,\\_Lee.html](https://eprints.qut.edu.au/view/person/Duffield,_Lee.html)*).

It also draws on extensive experience as a journalist mostly with the ABC.

An illustrative section is provided on shortwave radio broadcasting. While this is a contentious issue in the context of Asia-Pacific broadcasting, after the ABC's withdrawal from shortwave, its history as the medium of the time demonstrates the uses and power of international broadcasting generically. What applied to shortwave will apply to multi-media.

## **Observations**

In the current era the *modus operandi* of media organisations is to provide service through several channels and forms of media simultaneously. The strengths of the different media forms are enjoyed, whether broadcast, print or online, while you meet the expectations of more people in more and various audiences.

## **Audience support – plus obstacles and risk**

It is demonstrable that products across a broad range, from services to entertainment to news and commentary are taken up strongly and appreciated by overseas audiences. They benefit from the free flow of information, seeing it as helping with democratic aspirations and participation in civil society, and in the process represents Australian culture positively. Australian media in the Pacific, expressly ABC, have been recognised as extremely helpful whether in giving development news or providing vital linkages to lonely places across the oceans – and there is abundant potential for doing more, in more ways.

Communication systems of course are vulnerable to “noise”, being whatever cuts across and obstructs the free flow, and having multiple channels in multiple formats will be a useful antidote to that. Broadcasting news internationally provokes noise of one main kind: political interventions to constrict the output. The banning of an ABC pool crew in July by the government of Nauru because of sensitivity over some broadcasts shows up one such category of impediments to free flow. Of a second kind, arguments have been made recurrently over several decades from within the Foreign Affairs Department, that Radio Australia news broadcasts tended to cause undue trouble and so went against Australia’s interest. Historically those arguments were difficult to sustain and were not persisted with.

A third kind is newer, the technical and technological hobbling or de-licensing of new digital services by government agencies recalcitrant about free speech, with the one outstanding historical precedent of attempts at shortwave jamming. Pervasive management of the Internet and regulation of media in China is the leading contemporary example. Poor public access to digital systems and weaknesses in those systems, e.g. vulnerability to weather, outages and hacking, is compounded by such political interference in the production of news services within any country or region, and exclusion of outside services.

Yet if the media product is providing information in a spirit of freedom and truth, and has a following, deliberate obstruction becomes hard to justify or sustain. Importantly, some systems will be vulnerable at a time when others are not, allowing for key services and their content to “get through”. That point reinforces the notion of using diverse media formats, even in places a revival of shortwave radio, given both its long throw into remote corners and proven resilience against noise. Different formats, as digital and satellite based, or direct broadcast, have different vulnerabilities affecting their dependability and integrity.

### **Reaching out to isolated persons**

Returning to the question of actual isolation of persons, on remote islands, or even in large cities, where it can be fruitful to provide a set of different media options:

The test is for the audience member to be located on a fringe with limited options for hearing from the world, and focused on testing to see what channels exist and which will work. For getting programs to isolated persons, clearly the situation in 2018 is far less stressed than in the past, because of ubiquitous mobile phones and to a lesser extent the Internet, although as said, these systems are not impervious to noise. Apart from the risks mentioned above there are problems of access due to such factors as personal expense in a poor country and lack of essential services such as electricity. Delivering to the isolated, where it succeeds is a key approach known to generate large audiences, influence and respect for the broadcaster.

### **Innovation in media operations**

Future options for ABC are defined in terms of the opportunities presented by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and the degree of public access to them. They may range from global or macro services that provide “red line”, major new headline material, plus other content across frontiers; through to engagement even in hyper-local, community based projects exploiting sympathetic, easy-to-hand new technologies, e.g. online publishing, podcasting or local radio.

Here, the international wings of national broadcasters, which pioneered new media systems, have also been aggressively seeking new kinds of outlets since the 1980s, such as relaying to a local broadcaster who will play the program on a dedicated FM transmitter – as with the BBC and ABC in Port Moresby. A large example was the setting up of satellite transmission of Deutsche Welle to Australia around 1999 for networking on Australian News Radio.

A next step may be to build on such possibilities already realised with infrastructure, to enrich content, for instance by penetrating to local levels and engaging even with locally-based, hyper-local ventures in districts or towns on Pacific islands. In terms of obtaining content it would extend the traditional good work of correspondents who maintain contacts, by having such work on a more ongoing basis and obtaining reciprocally more outlets as well for Australian products.

Projects of the kind can be imagined and proposed because of availability of the phone services and Internet as basic means, would have a development aid application in promoting civil society, and through inter-action would trade well on actual knowledge of the field. Partners might include community

groups, municipalities, local businesses including commercial broadcasters or press interested in joint projects, or local offices of a national broadcaster. In such projects the ABC might draw on the long experience of its regional services using country correspondents and in later times active part-time broadcasters in local communities.

Training ABC personnel abroad by deploying them to collaborative projects with local broadcasters should be considered. In the context of frequent and common overseas travel by Australians, a large proportion of most university courses, one out of six semesters, commonly takes place as study abroad – and professional development by organisations like ABC might well take advantage of the same kind of cultural exposure and heightened professional challenge. I have reported elsewhere on the effectiveness of professional preparation abroad for journalists through designing and coordinating several programs for the Queensland University of Technology, (*see* [https://eprints.qut.edu.au/view/person/Duffield,\\_Lee.html](https://eprints.qut.edu.au/view/person/Duffield,_Lee.html)).

### **History – penetration of shortwave services.**

A strong example of the potential of an expanded international output is the well-documented massive following of Radio Australia that built up especially in China into the 1980s, based on news and the Countdown rock music show. Campaigns at the time against international broadcasters promoting a cultural hegemony would have caused the pulling-back from that program strategy at a time also when domestic Chinese media services were expanding. Yet the experience demonstrated the capacity of this medium to assemble a large following from vastly dispersed and unconnected individual users.

My experience of international media operations, specifically shortwave came to a head when reporting for the ABC from Europe during the collapse of the Eastern bloc in 1989-90. Previously that experience had included many surprising and poetic instances: supplementing limited media services growing up in the regions with an extra ABC station, and even Radio Peking; working with Asian colleagues who knew my movements through their use of Radio Australia, e.g. one Indonesian newspaper journalist surrounded with local media in Jakarta, was still otherwise isolated from needed sources; being myself in a similar situation while studying in Honolulu, and in Central France. As late as 2014 at a New Caledonia beach camp with students, no internet or phone service operating, we heard a football game from Australia. It was a sky

wave from an AM station in Queensland but called to mind again the mystique of distant communication across oceans to isolated pockets.

Reporting from within Eastern Europe during crisis depended on picking up fragmentary tip-offs on developments through scattered broadcasts from the outside world on the shortwave radio. The sudden collapse of communist authority had produced a failure of usual information channels, much as can happen in the present era when they shut down the Internet. Correspondents once they had something could almost always telephone out, and in effect pooled what they had through the resultant broadcasts. In Romania, the worst case, very sparse transmissions came through from the BBC and a few others including Radio France International.

Reflection on the reporting experience informed my doctoral research into mass media in the crisis, including a treatment of the influence of the international services directed into Eastern Europe. The more contentious broadcasters --Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, Deutschlandfunk – developed a policy of “agitation by naked facts”, broadcasting factual news to blind-side government propaganda.

Significantly for the present argument these broadcasts, semi-clandestine, aimed at listeners isolated from a normal free-flow, obtained very large audiences. Exasperated Eastern European governments which called them the “Black Heavens”, put up large-scale jamming operations, though these had limited impact, became too expensive to continue at full strength, and eventually were deployed in force only during certain international crises.

Extensive quantitative and qualitative audience research was carried out despite obvious difficulties of monitoring across hostile frontiers. For example there were estimates that in 1982-83, Radio Free Europe was reaching over 56% of adults in Bulgaria and up to 85% in Poland. A study based on 6500 interviews with East European citizens traveling to the West, and some inside Eastern Europe, measured the station’s “listening audience” as about one-third of adults in Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria, and between 58-68% in Hungary, Poland and Romania, (see L Duffield, *Graffiti on the Wall ...*, PhD thesis, 2002, <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/3904/>, p 70).

Surveys undertaken on the ground after the opening of borders in 1989 produced smaller figures for the “Black Heavens”. However in one instance nearly 14% of Hungarians were shown to have been listening regularly to RFE,

the BBC or VOA during that year, with similar performances in other countries including Poland -- equivalent to a well-used and influential station in any Western radio market, (<https://eprints.qut.edu.au/3904/>, p 71).

The underground opposition movements that eventually came to power in Eastern Europe attested to the shortwave broadcasters having had major impacts as channels of communication. Jacek Kuron of Polish Solidarity used RFE to announce times and places of meetings in the early 1980s, when even public telecommunications were cut off as a social control measure; Vaclav Havel in Czechoslovakia told the *International Herald Tribune*, 2.8.90, "if my fellow citizens knew me before I became President, they did so because of those stations"; and there was the celebrated case of Mikhail Gorbachev returning from the Crimea in 1991, publicly thanking the BBC for keeping him informed on the unsuccessful Soviet coup, while he was held in detention, (<https://eprints.qut.edu.au/3904/>, pp 72-74).

## Summary

This has been a statement about the importance of international media services that have grown out of the original shortwave radio, putting up two main points:

Delivering services to people in remote and isolated circumstances, typically people on Pacific islands, but also individuals in crowded "well served" media markets, is quintessential and definitional to journalism and broadcasting. Media in democratic societies produce a free flow of information, driving them to address potential audiences far away – to let them know what is happening in the world.

Proliferating new media and possibilities of audience engagement have produced the option of providing multiple and parallel channels of media of different types; it has become the mandate and responsibility of media organisations this Century. These new media systems are global in nature and scope to the extent that it would be unnatural and ultimately impossible to seek to confine many services to one country.

Beyond adopting different platforms at once for established mainline services, the burgeoning of ICT has produced opportunities to innovate with forms of media operation. It was suggested for instance that collaboration with local media operations in several locations, including Pacific islands, could produce

rich material for broadcasts and also could be a highly useful area for training and professional development of ABC personnel.

Shortwave radio was mentioned as the historical medium of international mass media which proved appreciably resistant to noise and built large and appreciative far-flung audiences. It may actually improve with new technology and should be considered for integration into modern systems (e.g. with installations less vulnerable to weather), where it would contribute to general integrity of ABC services. Where some systems in a multi-media operation may go down, others can be expected to continue to operate, and radio including shortwave would be a dependable element.

It is not to say that ABC operations should be predicated on living with crisis; that the organisation should set out to subvert tyranny in far-away places as its prime object. That might be a fine spin-off, but the point here really is that in any event multiplicity of outlets, high dependability and a long range of operations are axioms of modern-day media. These will make for an excellent carrier of content, the full free flow of valuable cultural offerings, once given their chance.

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(Signed) Lee Duffield  
Brisbane, 8 July 2018