

Sue Ahearn
personal submission

I have been a journalist for more than 40 years specialising in the Asia Pacific region.

I worked for ABC-Radio Australia for 20 years holding a variety of senior management positions including Network Manager Radio Australia, Editor International, Asia Editor, Senior Producer Pacific Beat and Executive Producer of News and Current Affairs.

I also worked on AusAid funded media development projects in the region managed by the ABC. I lived for three years in Papua New Guinea and two years in Solomon Islands. I also worked on short term projects in Tonga, Indonesia, East Timor, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar.

I am currently working as a media consultant in the Pacific. I have recently started a Facebook site called The Pacific Newsroom which is an aggregated collection of the best independent news and analysis about the Pacific. I started this site when the ABC cut back its specialist Pacific coverage. I was told by a senior ABC manager "that there's no one out there". I have 1000 followers who include many Pacific journalists and influencers. It is the only aggregated site of Pacific news.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/Pacificnewsroom/>

I remain in daily contact with a large network of journalists in the Pacific, mainly of whom I have mentored and trained.

My observations for this submission are anecdotal and reflect my personal experiences living and working in the region.

It is my belief that the lack of accurate and independent information and knowledge is one of the biggest challenges facing the Pacific, in particular PNG.

Speculation, rumour and gossip are rife because of the absence of facts. Facebook, which is incredibly popular in PNG, carries blatantly false news on a daily basis.

Only 13-percent of Papua New Guineans have access to the power grid so their access to media is limited. It is one of the most challenged countries in the world for electricity. The price for power is also amongst the highest in the world. Charging phones and radios is difficult although this is changing with the International Finance Corporation, part of the World Bank group, working to bring solar to the country.

Mobiles and Facebook have revolutionised communication in the past eight years. In 2010, I helped introduce the first Facebook news pages in PNG while working with journalists to improve content on the Media Development Initiative project at the national broadcaster, the NBC. Latest figures show 90-percent of the country have access to mobile phones which come pre-loaded with Facebook. For many rural people, it's their sole source of news and information since the cutbacks to the ABC in 2017.

The ABC was able to build a long-distance community of listeners in PNG and the Pacific for more than 70 years. Sadly, many of those listeners no longer have access to any news and information.

In my experience, most people listen to radio on their phones. The mobiles available in PNG come from Indonesia and are equipped with FM radio. Some models also have television.

I spent considerable time in the remote provinces from the Highlands to the coastal areas, and saw how important knowledge and information was to rural people who have few sources of information. The ABC is seen as a trusted friend and is viewed as being part of the NBC. I often heard people, say if it's on the ABC, it must be true.

The ABC is able to report on stories that local journalists cannot touch, especially when it involves corruption. I know journalists in the NBC National newsroom in Port Moresby who had been physically threatened by politicians (some at the highest level) for writing unpopular stories.

The ABC's reports from international correspondents around the world are used regularly in news bulletins, giving the NBC credibility and much needed international content. Commercial FM stations are widely listened to but play music back to back, with little news.

Pacific Islanders feel they personally know the ABC correspondents and follow their stories closely. In some remote villages, a radio is the only contact with the outside world.

For example, in Solomon Islands the house meri (house girl) of a colleague expressed concern for the safety of an ABC correspondent covering a major disaster, as though she was a close personal friend.

A surprising example of the impact of the ABC's reporting through its obligation to provide an Australian perspective of world affairs, involved the resignation of the NSW Premier Barry O'Farrell in 2012 over gift of a \$3000 bottle of Grange.

While good governance workshops are held on a regular basis by development agencies, this resignation had a huge impact in PNG. In a country, riddled with corruption, people could not believe a politician had to resign over a bottle of wine. It reverberated on local talkback for days and was a hot topic of conversation amongst local politicians and in bars and restaurants all over town.

The story also highlighted the importance of the ABC producing content that is tailor made for the region and not just domestic content without context or background.

This work must be done by experienced journalists who have an understanding of the cross cultural sensitivities involved in producing stories for an audience that is not Australian. The Pacific audience has strong religious views and conservative values, where violence is a norm and living a daily challenge.

The ABC used to mentor a network of stingers around the Pacific who filed content with local context and background. A journalist in a studio in Australia cannot capture the story like a reporter on the ground. While this was often difficult to manage and stringers sometimes faced backlash within their own communities, it gave credibility and expert local knowledge to the ABC. Radio New Zealand is particularly smart at this and has recruited Pacific journalists as full time staff in NZ.

The recent 60 Minutes story by the Nine Network on the growing Chinese influence in the Pacific is an example of how sensational and uninformed journalism can cause unnecessary harm and concern in the region. This sort of irresponsible journalism also damages Australia's reputation. The story was widely shared across social media in the region and is still being shared two months later.

For those who live in Port Moresby, expatriates and elite Papua New Guineas who can afford to pay, there is good access to satellite and cable TV from around the world.

The Port Moresby based satellite company Hitron offers 117 TV and 15 Stereo Radio Channels including ABC Queensland, ABC News 24, Seven Network, SBS, Triple J, ABC Radio National, ABC Classic FM, 2GB, and global networks BBC, CNN, and Al Jazeera. It is the biggest satellite and cable supplier in PNG but many supplies Port Moresby. Its services are not available to rural people in remote areas.

<http://www.hitron.com.pg>

http://www.hitron.com.pg/tv_channels.html

I have been unable to obtain audience figures from Hitron but my experience from living in Port Moresby and bring a subscriber, is that the service is widely used. However, 85-percent of the PNG population live outside of Port Moresby and do not have access to the service.

There are two foreign owned English language newspapers in Port Moresby. The Post Courier (News Limited) is the largest selling paper in the Pacific with a circulation of around 40,000. The The National's circulation is approximately 20,000. Distribution is mostly confined to Port Moresby and each paper is read by an average of 10 people. The small number of papers that do make it to the provinces, are read by dozens and passed around the communities for weeks.

Australia and PNG have a long standing relationship that is enhanced by sharing stories between the two countries. The loss of the ABC to many parts of the Pacific makes the region feel abandoned by its old friend Australia. The way to start rebuilding this important relationship is to properly fund an international service offering relevant content on a variety of platforms that can be accessed by our neighbours in remote areas across the Pacific.