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# SUBMISSION: Review of Australian Broadcasting Services in the Asia Pacific

BY: The Vanuatu Daily Post

## Australia is not part of the Pacific conversation

Reasons to expand Australian broadcast reach in the Pacific islands, and suggested first steps

As many others have suggested, broadcast communications is an essential component in the projection of soft power. The lack of access to the eyes and ears—and therefore the hearts and minds—of Pacific islanders works to the detriment of Australian interests.

It also works against the interest of Pacific nations.

### The need to recognise and respect agency

Too often, the strategic dynamic in the Pacific is portrayed as a tug of war with Asian powers on one side, and the Australia/NZ/USA alliance on the other. The agency of Pacific island nations themselves is conveniently overlooked. This is not only patronising and parochial, it is a costly blunder, a wilful decision based on an historically inaccurate assessment of the Pacific peoples.

It is, not to put too fine a point on it, the reason why China has made such strides of late, through its insistence on treating Pacific island heads of government with the same deference and respect as it accords any other world leader.

In this part of the world, politics is personal. Policy is driven by personality. Individual attitudes and abilities are inescapably linked to decisions which can in many—if not most—cases have a decisive effect on the success of endeavours on the ground.

Trust is established only slowly in the islands. Our storied friendliness is hardly a pretence, of course, but it's only the first of many layers of interaction. Those who fail to penetrate it are doomed to frustration and failure to get traction in their efforts.

As the old joke has it, the day an Irishman tells you to commit unspeakable acts on your own person is the day you know you've made a friend for life. The same can be said for many cultures in the Pacific. A rank of smiling, friendly faces should never be construed as

agreement or even acquiescence. If anything, it's a sign they don't trust you enough to dislike you.

Australia's ignorance extends far beyond its diplomats' ability to read the temperature of the room. A general lack of interest and understanding of why Australians should care about the Pacific results in a self-perpetuating cycle of neglect.

Viewers and listeners don't care about the Pacific because they see very little programming originating from there. Editors and producers won't commission stories from the Pacific because viewers don't care.

Politicians don't rise or fall on their Pacific foreign policy stance because voters know nothing—and care little—about its importance.

Pacific leaders, too often ignored, belittled, or even subjected to baseless ridicule, know when they're not wanted.

And Australians may not know they know. Our smiles may only broaden.

### Why not live as peers?

The case for understanding is of course predicated on the argument that Pacific lives are every bit as valuable, every bit as rich, and every bit as important as Australian lives.

Australia—largely through the ABC—built much of its identity from the rural areas that still comprise the bulk of its land mass. In the early days of broadcasting, the explicit purpose of the service was to reach even the remotest communities, and to tie those communities together.

A corollary: the legitimacy of Aboriginal culture, perspective, philosophies and even Aboriginal lives was denigrated in large part through its absence on the airwaves and therefore in the public dialogue. These problems persist today, although broadcast media have done much to redress this tragic imbalance.

In terms of Australia's place in the Pacific, however, little or no progress has been made.

Forgive the impudence, but to say less than this would be dishonest:

It is difficult to convey just how blind and condescending the average Australian looks the first time they set foot in the Pacific islands. The process of understanding even the most basic issues is one that takes months, years, and sadly sometimes decades. The cost of this parochialism cannot be overstated. It affects every aspect of every interaction.

It may not be evident to them—that's our point—but Pacific islanders with few exceptions find themselves making an unconscious, reflexive adjustment when dealing with Australians. Islanders try to take in stride their ignorance of social mores, of cultural taboos, of visual and verbal cues, of even the most basic elements of interaction.

Despite the linguistic commonalities our education systems inculcate into us, we are separated by a gulf.

This affects lives, it affects development spending, and it impairs the ability of Australia to assure the friendship and support of its nearest neighbours.

It affects, in ways that are difficult to convey and impossible to overvalue, Australia's security in the region.

### Pragmatic concerns

The impact may be difficult to express, but some of the manifestations of this disjuncture can usefully be highlighted as examples of the cost of ignorance:

## Cyclone Pam

The blithe assumption that Pacific governments are corrupt and ineffective led many non-governmental organisations to buck and resist when the Government of Vanuatu announced that it would not allow ‘cowboy’ operations—that is, aid and development interventions that did not have an explicit government mandate.

More than one NGO turned to their domestic media outlets to express their dissatisfaction with this, and media, sadly, took it as axiomatic that the NGOs were right, and the government of Vanuatu was simply trying to scoop up their money.

Nothing could be further from the truth. One well-intentioned NGO found itself ejected from the National Disaster Management Office when it repeatedly passed incorrect information to disaster response officials, resulting in one case in a costly and wasteful diversion of a helicopter for half a day.

Lack of engagement, understanding and relationships led to millions of dollars of wasted private donations. People filled container after container with goods that might or might not be needed, and sent them to Vanuatu with no specified recipient. Ultimately, the Customs department had to settle a bill of well over \$2 million for storage fees alone.

To our knowledge, this story has yet to be told in Australian media.

## Port Vila Urban Development Project

Australia’s first foray in many years into infrastructure development in Vanuatu has been a comedy of errors. Years behind schedule, millions of dollars wasted, and still no end in sight. It has made Australian aid into a bad joke. When Senator Fierravanti-Wells was complaining about roads to nowhere, motorists in Port Vila bitterly remarked they were driving on one.

Many—perhaps most—of the problems with this project arose from a lack of understanding of the people involved, their capacity, and the nature of doing work in a Pacific islands country. Many of the Australians involved were initially unable to interact usefully with their Pacific island colleagues. The results began to manifest almost immediately.

Even the most basic mistakes proved costly. Currency fluctuations were not factored in, and as a result about \$6 million in value, out of roughly \$30 million, has been lost. Imagine thinking that you can work in Australian dollars wherever and whenever you like.

Australians worked as crew leaders, planners, and designers in this project, and at every stage, they made what can only be characterised as rookie errors. The result is a hodge-podge of more or less workable bits that are still constricting traffic, inhibiting local commerce, and in some cases reducing road safety.

The political cost of this is significant.

## The ‘Chinese Bases’ myth

Australian media still insist on repeating the false claim that the government of Vanuatu was in the early stages of negotiating a Chinese military base. The original report was filed before even a single Vanuatu official was contacted.

It was false.

In the weeks following, the base became a permanent military presence, and then it wasn’t so much as a sure thing, but there was ‘some truth to that’.

It was false.

Australia has effectively shot itself in the foot, strategically, because its media won't deign to actually talk to local officials. Without any evidence to support the conclusion, they simply assume they're untrustworthy. The truth is more difficult: Some are trustworthy; some aren't.

It's a journalist's job to figure out which is which.

But ignorance breeds ignorance, and perpetuates itself. Pacific islanders can only watch, bemused by this blindness.

These are only a few glaring examples among many. The point of this submission is not to engage in a litany of complaint; rather it is to underline the value that media can provide in building context and understanding.

### How to improve?

Broadcasting in the Pacific and reporting *on* the Pacific is expensive and time-consuming. Nobody knows this better than we do.

Even the most dauntless and determined media organisation faces systemic constraints and sometimes insurmountable obstacles. Primary sources are few. An intrepid Australian investigative reporter might be able to wrangle a string of scoops out of government records searches in Australia. In most Pacific countries, those documents often don't exist.

Confronting corporate malfeasance or government corruption, the bread and butter of political journalism in Australia, requires vastly more legwork here, and a significant dose of legal liability. The example of the Fiji Times is just the most recent and noteworthy.

It has often happened in the past that Australian media services agreed to take the brunt of a government's opprobrium by front-running a story provided to them by a Pacific source. This allows the domestic service the cover of simply reporting what everyone else is talking about.

During the now-infamous Presidential pardons debacle, Vanuatu media ensured the ABC's presence in a key press conference so that the reporter could ask the awkward questions that might have gotten a local journalist beaten up, or worse.

Just getting to the story can be a trial, too. Travel is often costly and slow. Adding the price of a plane ticket to and from Sydney, Melbourne or Brisbane can be prohibitive. Happily, some of us are sitting on this side of the water already.

The flow of information to and from the island of Ambae right now is a trickle at best. Lack of communications and up-to-date information is hamstringing not only operations on the ground, but the government's decision-making and service delivery.

In non-disaster situations poor communications and difficult logistics still hamper the news media. There are, for example, still no photographs available of a civil disturbance on the island of Tanna in which one man had several fingers hacked off with a bush knife, and which resulted in seven arrests.

Our inability to shine a light on such matters makes it difficult for us as a society to come to grips with this violence, and to address the underlying issues.

Our inability to show the world what's happening to the island of Ambae is a product of these factors, but it's exacerbated by the lack of engagement and assistance from our regional partners.

In the past week, we've received an offer to share expenses with an Australian broadcaster in order to send someone to report in person. This came as a pragmatic response to

decisions made not to send an Australian reporter to cover the story, presumably because of the old excuse that it's hard, and the domestic audience don't want to see it.

The same rationale was provided for the Australian media's failure early on to cover the massive earthquake in Papua New Guinea's Hela province, and countless other cases.

Nevertheless, they persevered... in providing hourly live updates during the rescue of a group of Thai boys trapped in a cave.

No one questions the value or importance of that story. It's a compelling example of heroism and endurance. The point is that there are more than a few of those stories happening right now, in Ambae, in PNG... in fact, everywhere in the Pacific.

And there's no need to worry too much about costs. If we only had a fraction of the funds and technical capacity available to Australian media, Pacific island journalists could surely find a way to feed material directly the Australian studios.

We may be few in number, but we are not utterly unskilled. There is a vast, untapped potential for improvement in Australia's reporting on the Pacific—and improving how the Pacific reports on itself—if only Australian broadcasters were willing to formally partner with their island counterparts.

Short-wave, HF and other radio frequencies are essential at times like this. When cyclones, earthquakes and tsunamis strike, offshore SW and HF facilities are equally important. In the 48 hours after the passing of cyclone Pam, over 90% of the nation's domestic communications capacity was offline due to storm damage. On some islands, emergency assessment teams were reduced to dropping satellite phones from helicopters to people waiting on the ground.

The results of improved information flows would be quite literally incalculable. Let's ignore for a moment the strategic value of allowing Australian officials to have an idea of who's on the other end of the telephone line, and how to speak their language. Merely broadening the cultural sphere is a net gain.

It works in both directions. Access to Australian media in the islands improves our understanding and makes it easier to defend such basic ideas as democracy, commerce and individual rights.

And Australian access to island media sources could work wonders in improving their approaches to decision-making, peaceful coexistence, diversity and tolerance.

Trust us. It would be a Good Thing.

## Recommendations

So what's needed?

- Shortwave/HF infrastructure and an international presence similar to the BBC World Service.
- Formal cooperation agreements; pragmatic and workable cost- and content-sharing protocols that can be leveraged both on a programmatic and ad hoc basis.
- Dedicated space online, and time in broadcast media schedules. Again, this would be on a reciprocal basis.
- Investment by donor agencies in media and media-supportive infrastructure. This includes but is not limited to:
  - Internet capacity – cables, 4G transmission towers, urban and rural service availability.

- Technical training opportunities, specifically apprenticeships, human resource exchanges, cooperative ventures and multilateral journalist-in-residence programmes for Pacific island *and* Australian journalists.
- The subsidised technical assistance required to usefully leverage content-sharing agreements involving both content creation and consumption.
- Equipment sharing/subsidisation. Broadcast facilities in small states are financially unviable, but when revenue potential spreads across larger audiences, they become at least conceivable. Shared or commonly-held facilities are a workable response to small audience numbers and limited revenues.

Every single one of these suggestions implies costs and commitments. The appeal of each of these is limited by existing attitudes and ignorance of the benefits. There are compelling reasons to focus on other priorities, simply because the value of this priority remains unknown.

In a nutshell, the only way to change our understanding of the value of engaging more actively in the Pacific is to... engage more actively and find out why it's worth it.

You'll never know unless you try. And what you don't know is already hurting you.