

Submission to Review of Australian Broadcasting Services in the Asia Pacific

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As always, communicating Australia's views, perspectives and voices to audiences in the Asia-Pacific region is important. And, more than ever before, finding effective pathways for accessing audiences in this region presents the utmost challenge.

Shortwave radio broadcasting is no longer a viable option. As early as 2010, I led a team that investigated the prevalence of shortwave radio listening in a number of provinces in China, and found that the number of people listening to shortwave radio from foreign nations was negligible.

Shortwave is not only subject to deliberate disruption by the censorship mechanisms of receiving countries, but it is also increasingly disrupted by the ubiquitous use of battery-powered electronic bikes in urban spaces throughout Asian countries.

Much of the debate about Australia's influence in the Asia-Pacific region via the media has so far focused on the role of the ABC in promoting Australia's views and perspectives. Implicit in this is the assumption that broadcast transmission will continue to be relevant as a means of content delivery.

While public diplomacy through international broadcasting – via services such as the BBC – has been in operation for many decades, the broadcast transmission model – whether it be delivered by satellite or terrestrially – is no longer viable. Public diplomacy in the digital era demands a very different suite of approaches from those of days gone by. The sooner we rid ourselves of a simple sender-receiver transmission model of communication and start to adopt a more flexible, agile, multi-platform, interactive, diffused model, the sooner we will begin to make progress in identifying suitable solutions to the challenges facing public diplomacy today.

There are two main reasons that demand such a paradigm shift, the first of which is technological. We have now truly entered the post-broadcasting, digital era. While many locations in the Asia-Pacific region still do not have extensive Internet coverage, both rural and urban areas in the most populous Asian countries – India, Indonesia, China – are highly digitalised. As a consequence, the pattern of media usage among the populations of these regions has changed dramatically. Most people nowadays typically access audio (including radio) and visual (including TV) content via online platforms delivered to mobile devices. The future clearly lies in the effective online delivery of a wide variety of content in an assortment of different forms, including written-word content, podcasts, vodcasts, digital radio, and digital TV.

The second reason that a new paradigm is needed is social. The size of Australia's migrant population from the Asia-Pacific region has grown exponentially. Migrants' life strategies have also changed; many of them now routinely and frequently travel between Australia and Asia-Pacific for business and for pleasure. Moreover, the media consumption practices of these migrants have also changed. There is an unprecedented high level of interface and overlap between what these migrants consume in Australia and what people in their home countries consume. The diasporic media in Australia, thanks to digitalisation, are no longer operating on the old model of 'ethnic media' (i.e., mainly via print newspapers and radio), but more as part of the digitalised, transnational, global diasporic network.

One important implication of these developments is that we must identify and assess possible mechanisms and strategies for capitalising on the potential of diasporic ethnic-language media to function as de facto instruments of public diplomacy on behalf of Australia. The Australian government's Public Diplomacy Strategy (2014-2016) rightly points to the importance of 'diaspora diplomacy', and promises to take steps to 'engage diaspora communities drawing on their linguistic skills, social networks and cultural community connections', by making active use of 'online and

social media as public diplomacy tools'. The latest Foreign Policy White Paper also reinforces this point.

It is important to note that, in moving away from a transmission-based model of delivery, we must also renounce broadcasting and begin to embrace something closer to narrowcasting, as the underlying philosophy of content development. This means that, while we will increasingly need to adopt a country-specific approach, we must also think about how to use – simultaneously – multiple approaches to target one particular country/region.

This may involve setting up digital content platforms that can reach these destinations directly. Ideally, there should be a public service – led digital strategy, plus good offline support and localization. It may also involve forming partnerships with foreign media organisations – government, commercial, or independent – that can serve as hosts of Australian content. Finally, but perhaps most importantly, we must take concrete steps towards making good use of the diasporic language media in Australia.

For instance, China presents a most challenging case due to its censorship practices and a regulatory framework that is characterised by a suspicion and distrust of foreign media. At the same time, there is a vast and growing number of Chinese migrants in Australia, and an almost ubiquitous uptake of the Chinese social media platform WeChat – both in China itself and among PRC migrants all over the world. Given that most people in the globally extended Chinese community now access at least some of their news and information through various WeChat subscription accounts, it seems particularly urgent for Australia to explore how to effectively access Chinese audiences through such subscription accounts, particularly those that are used by diasporic Chinese users. In this way, the social media platforms used by Chinese-speaking migrants in Australia are potential intermediaries for reaching Chinese audiences in China. Some may say that WeChat is subject to the Chinese government's censorship – and indeed it is. But so are any other forms of foreign content going to China. Moreover, compared to broadcasting, digital platforms present more opportunities for dealing with, if not bypassing, censorship.

The last point is particularly worth emphasising, given that, to date, current debates about Australia's exercise of public diplomacy and soft power within the Asia-Pacific region have more or less ignored this sector. It is time we started regarding diasporic language media in Australia not just as isolated pockets of ethnic language media, but rather as potentially powerful gateways for projecting Australia's interests, values and ideas into the heartland of a number of Asia-Pacific nations.

It is also time we went beyond the traditional understanding of public diplomacy and started exploring how *people-to-people diplomacy* can be harnessed to work towards the same goal as public diplomacy via media.

In summary, public diplomacy in the digital era requires not simply a rejigging of the current broadcast transmission model; it also requires a complete paradigm shift. And the process of identifying strategies and solutions within this new paradigm should draw on research from fields such as business management, political communication (particularly theories of nation-building), and international and cross-cultural communication strategies, as well as from international relations studies.

About the Author

Wanning Sun is an expert in media and international communication. Her main research interests include soft power, public diplomacy and diasporic Chinese media. She has written extensively on these topics, including in *The Conversation* and *East Asia Forum*. Her publications in these areas can be accessed from her UTS webpage: <https://www.uts.edu.au/staff/wanning.sun>.

Her edited volumes – *Media and the Chinese Diaspora: Community, Communication and Commerce* (2006) and *Media and Communication in the Chinese Diaspora: Rethinking Transnationalism* (2016) – document the global development of diasporic Chinese-language media in the twenty-first century.

She is the author of a major report, 'Chinese-Language Media in Australia: Developments, Challenges and Opportunities' (2016) (available at: <http://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/chinese-language-media-australia-developments-challenges-and-opportunities-2>).

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