

To The Director,  
National and Community Broadcasting  
Department of Communication and the Arts  
Australia Government  
Canberra ACT  
Australia

## **Review of Australian Broadcasting Services in the Asia Pacific**

### **Submission by Av-Comm Pty Ltd and Tecsun Radios Australia**

**Date:** August 2 2018

Av-Comm Pty Ltd and its subsidiary Tecsun Radios Australia have provided telecommunications infrastructure and services to the Pacific Islands since 1995. During that time we have operated primarily in the Solomon islands, where we have installed satellite uplinks, downlinks and radio transmission equipment, working with the national telecommunications provider Solomon Telekom, and the national broadcaster Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation (SIBC).

Our work has taken us to outlying islands where the lack of reliable communications is immediately apparent. We have supplied over 500 shortwave radios to outlying communities for the sole purpose of utilising shortwave communications as the principal source of news, education and entertainment.

# Executive Summary

Tecsun Radios Australian believes Australia should have an international shortwave service, focussing on delivery to our regional neighbours. Previously this service was provided by the Australia Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) international Radio Australia shortwave broadcasts. This service has a long history dating back to World War II, provided by a free, democratic society without bias.

Section 31AA of the ABC 1983 Act provides authority for the ABC to be the sole provider of international shortwave services originating from Australia. It is Tecsun Radios Australia's belief that in the absence of the ABC providing a service, this section of the Act is now a hindrance to the provision of alternative shortwave services because it prevents private Non Government Organisations (NGOs) and not-for-profit organisations from providing an equivalent or alternative service.

Tecsun Radios Australia believes that shortwave radio is the ideal technology to deliver a radio service into the Pacific because of the vast distances required to be covered. As with all technology there are improvements that can be made, Digital Radio Mondiale (DRM) is one of those examples. DRM allows lower operating costs for broadcasters with increased benefits to the listener.

Our submission offers an argument for a review of Section 31AA of the ABC Act 1983, to act as a catalyst for the development of commercial and not-for-profit shortwave broadcast services.

## Key Points of Discussion

Below are 4 key topics we wish to present as our argument for the establishment of an Australian shortwave service.

- (1) Section 31AA of the ABC Act 1983 is a hindrance to the provision of alternative shortwave services.
- (2) The availability of news and opinions protects individual freedoms and facilitates the free exchange of thoughts and this open discussion ideas should be promoted.
- (3) With consideration to the unique geographic makeup of our region, an appropriate mix of technologies must be utilised to allow access by as many listeners as possible.
- (4) The Pacific Islands is a dispersed and often low socio-economic population with limited local infrastructure. Methods of communication must be simple and affordable if they are to be successful.

## **Section 31AA of the ABC Act 1983 is a hindrance to the provision of alternative shortwave services.**

In order to allow access to interested private and NGOs, Section 31AA of the ABC ACT 1983 should be repealed. By eliminating the exclusive right of the ABC to provide international shortwave transmissions the government will inherently open up the industry to private organisations and NGOs.

The repealing of Section 31AA will provide an environment that has the best chance of establishing and facilitating a long-term international service.

Allowing private enterprise to engage in such an activity would relieve the pressure on Government funding, in much the same way as has occurred in power, telecommunications and postal industries.

Introducing private enterprise will push the implementation of new technologies such as DRM, which can demonstrate operational cost reductions of up to 50% over conventional shortwave.

## **News and opinions from a society that protects individual freedoms and facilitates the free exchange of thought and ideas.**

Many countries in the Pacific Islands are also fragile democracies. In recent history, several countries have shut down local media and foreign media publications and broadcasts. This occurred in Fiji where Radio Australia's owned and operated FM transmitters were shut down by the Fijian military for an extended period of time in 2009.

A more recent example of a country exerting influence over the media occurred when the government of Nauru prevented the ABC from attending a major regional meeting.

A free and transparent democratic society can only exist with a free and unrestrained media. It is the responsibility of the Australian Government to act as a regional leader in promoting the free exchange of thoughts and ideas through the media. Australia's media diversity and integrity is a fundamental tenet of our society and one that should be celebrated and promoted amongst its regional neighbours to contribute our unique Australian perspective to that exchange of thoughts and ideas. Other countries providing broadcast services into the Pacific may not share this view.

## **Considering the unique geographic area, an appropriate mix of technologies must be utilised to access as many listeners as possible.**

Local FM and AM radio broadcasts are important parts of the technology mix required to deliver media services to the Pacific Islands. However, they rely on local infrastructure which, at times, can be intermittent. Shortwave radio does not rely on local infrastructure and therefore cannot be shut down or disrupted by natural disasters at the impacted area. We believe shortwave broadcasting should be a critical piece of the overall technology mix Australia should adopt as part of our overall diplomatic and regional policy in the Pacific.

In many parts of the Pacific, internet connectivity is almost non-existent, primarily due to the reliance on satellite communications which is heavily impacted by rainfall.

In response to Radio Australia's shutdown, the Papua New Guinea government are considering establishing a new shortwave service for Bougainville. Shortwave is the preferred technology because of the unique geographic topology which is not well suited to FM broadcast coverage.

## **The Pacific islands is a dispersed low socio-economic population with limited local infrastructure. Methods of communication must be simple and affordable if they are to be effective.**

Below is a list of specific examples of how shortwave radio has been illustrated as the simplest, most valuable and most effective method of communications during a natural disaster or civil unrest.

In his recent submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications "Australia Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Restoring Shortwave Radio) Bill 2007" the Prime Minister of Vanuatu stated that expert advice offered via Radio Australia's shortwave service during cyclone Pam in March 2015 allowed affected residents to take steps to minimise loss of life. Despite the destructive force wreaked on the islands of Vanuatu only 11 lives were lost.

In December 2016 the Solomon Islands was hit with a magnitude 7.8 earthquake. The earthquake triggered tsunami warnings throughout the region. Residents on the island of Choiseul used Radio Australia to keep themselves updated on the aftershock and tsunami risks. (Australia has spent approximately A\$3 billion over 14 years to restore democracy to the Solomon Islands).

The classic example of the importance of shortwave occurred on April 15, 2009 during a political coup in Fiji, when all other forms of radio communications had been shut down (including FM rebroadcasting of Radio Australia) by the Fiji government. Then Managing Director of the ABC Mark Scott, received a text message from inside Fiji to the ABC that said, "We are trying to listen to you online but are having difficulty. Please keep broadcasting. You are all we have."

Shortwave radio also played a vital role in getting information to communities in the middle of civil disturbance such as in East Timor, in the lead up to independence.

## Summary

Av-Comm Pty Ltd believes that the re-establishment of shortwave broadcasts from Australia will restore an Australian voice in the region to contribute to the mix of ideological discussion and ideas, and ensure our unique Australian values are shared and celebrated amongst our regional neighbours.

We believe that if the restrictions preventing private companies and NGOs were lifted through a review of Section 31AA of the ABC Act 1983, there would be opportunity for new players to enter this arena and invest in the new technology that digital shortwave has to offer.

Should Section 31AA be modified to allow private companies and NGOs to establish international shortwave services, Av-Comm Pty Ltd intends to establish a commercial entity to provide these services. We believe there is a business case for international shortwave broadcasting and believe this would be complementary to any restoration of Radio Australia services. Our commercial model would allow air-time to be purchased at a nominal rate which would be available to the Australian Government and any other entities who wish to broadcast to our target markets.

It has been demonstrated that shortwave broadcasts provide a reliable method of delivering life-saving information, in the face of natural disasters, and political unrest. Shortwave provides a service complementary to local AM and FM broadcasts.

Shortwave broadcasting from Australia will promote a free and unrestrained media and provide the mechanism for the free exchange of ideas between countries, without interference from outside parties.

We invite the Department of Communication and The Arts to meet with us to discuss our commercial model for international shortwave broadcasting and how this can work in collaboration with any of the Department's future plans.

This essentially outlines the points we wish to convey to the Committee and I thank them for the opportunity to express our opinion on the matter.

Garry Craft  
Director