

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

(Bruce Dover & Ian Macintosh)

Australia's international voice, once strong, influential and broadcast across much of the Asia Pacific, has become little more than a croak into the ether.

Substantial cuts to funding, waning Government commitment, changing national priorities and digital disruption have resulted in Australia becoming little more than a fringe broadcaster at a time when our region faces sweeping geopolitical, social, economic and environmental challenges.

In tandem, the ABC's role, impact and commitment to international broadcasting have diminished over the past two decades, and markedly in recent years. The model which has sustained almost eight decades of Australian international broadcasting is no longer up to the task and its effectiveness - as prescribed by the ABC Charter<sup>1</sup> - must now be seriously questioned.<sup>2</sup>

Pumping additional new funding into the ABC to lift its game on international broadcasting is a 'back to the future' strategy which fails to recognize the opportunities offered by a new, more nimble approach drawing on the very best that Australia and all Australians have to offer.

This submission asks the Review to consider a new international broadcasting model which, while building upon the ABC's laudable past achievements in this field, better represents and reflects contemporary Australia to our Asia Pacific neighbours.

## **The Authors**

Bruce Dover and Ian Macintosh have combined experience of nine decades in journalism, broadcasting, news management and international media consulting. Both were foreign correspondents in the Asia Pacific earlier in their careers and have since undertaken various senior executive and consulting roles at the ABC and with international news organizations in this region and beyond.

## **Executive Summary**

Australia's ability to project a vision of itself to the Asia-Pacific region has undeniably diminished with the decline in the ABC's international broadcasting capabilities.

We accept and respect the arguments put by experienced professional broadcasters, interested regional audience members and a group such as the Supporters of Australian Broadcasting in Asia and the Pacific which, in its submission to this Review, noted that *"Done well, state-funded international broadcasting is an efficient and effective way to shape long term attitudes and preferences in the region through positive attraction and persuasion"*.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> ABC Act, Part II, s.6(1)(b)(i)

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, G. Dobell *The Strategist* 30/07/2018 -

<https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/author/graeme-dobell/>

<sup>3</sup> *Supporters of Australian Broadcasting in Asia and the Pacific* submission to this Review, August 2018

We would add that 'soft power' of this kind is an effective counter to hostile propaganda, inaccurate reporting and extremist rhetoric capable of harming not only the reputation of Australia and its people but also their livelihoods.

Where our submission differs from the others is in its proposed model for the provision of international broadcasting services. It is our contention that the current model of funding the ABC to provide the nation's international voice is broken and that a new approach is required.

We believe that Australia's international broadcasting service should be placed in the hands of an independent corporation or foundation that would better reflect the plurality of views and opinions that shape Australia – not just those captured by the ABC.

Whilst we acknowledge the depth of international broadcasting expertise developed by the ABC over many decades, we would argue that the commercial media and the independent production sector are also well placed to provide a range of dedicated, bespoke programming for Asia Pacific audiences and that the bulk of any new funding must be contestable.

We would argue that if, as a country, we are serious about having a powerful and credible voice in the region, then we need bipartisan political agreement, supported by business and other relevant sectors, on a Charter that clearly enunciates the mission of Australia's future international broadcasting service, including the need to target regional audiences and not just Australian expatriates. It needs to be a service that provides independent, contextualised and trustworthy news, information and entertainment programs for Asia Pacific audiences via multiple digital delivery platforms.

A new independent international broadcasting service would require guaranteed annual Government funding to meet its obligations; but, conversely, it would also need to provide demonstrable proof that it was meeting its Charter and delivering a return on the investment.

Under the current model, Australia has already surrendered much of the hard-won broadcasting territory and influence it once held across the region. Others have moved in to occupy the space. We believe that without a new model and a new approach Australia will simply fall further behind our rivals and any voice we hope to project will be less a roar than a whimper.

## **The Story So Far**

The ABC's international broadcasting activities began in December 1939, in response to the rapid spread of Japanese aggression and propaganda in the Asia Pacific. Over the ensuing decades Radio Australia became a significant and respected voice across the region. Its television equivalent, Australia Television International, launched by the ABC in 1993 with Federal Government funding, was to follow a less certain path. Operated for several years from 1998 by the Seven Network, it was returned to the ABC fold in 2002 and since then has been re-branded no fewer than four times: ABC Asia Pacific, Australia Television, Australia Plus and, now, ABC Australia. The ABC still operates international services in radio, television and online but does so with a fraction of the funding and resources it committed to the activity earlier in this decade.<sup>4</sup>

Prior to that, funding and resources for international broadcasting suffered big reductions in the corporation's 1997/98 budget. This followed the findings of the Mansfield Report into the ABC

---

<sup>4</sup> Attachment 1

which, inter alia, recommended the closure of its international radio and television services to reduce costs. Both survived, albeit with straitened horizons. Radio Australia has continued to operate under tight funding ever since. The television service (as ABC Asia Pacific, then Australia Network) again received government financing after 2002, in particular the 10-year \$220 million funding package which was terminated by the present Government in 2014.

Punishing cuts to overall ABC finances in the 2014/15 Budget, and the 2014 loss of Australia Network's government funding, led to that network's closure later the same year.

Whilst the precise financial and staffing outcomes from these episodes have not been detailed in subsequent ABC Annual Reports, we estimate annual funding for all of the Corporation's Charter-prescribed international broadcasting activities dropped from circa [REDACTED] (including transmission funding) in 2013/14 to circa [REDACTED] (excluding some transmission funding) in 2014/15.<sup>5</sup> Staff numbers plummeted from 98 to 46 over the same period.<sup>6</sup> The impact on the ABC's international broadcasting activities is obvious.

Despite the loss of DFAT's financial support for Australia Network, the ABC continued to operate a multi-platform international service (radio, television and online) with around one-third of its previous budget and fewer than half the staff.

We understand a similar annual commitment of around \$ [REDACTED] (including some transmission charges) continues to fund the same ABC international services more than three years later.<sup>7</sup> This comes after the ABC's short-wave transmitters were closed in early 2017 achieving estimated savings of several million dollars. Whilst the ABC committed some of that money to new FM transmitters in Papua New Guinea, it is unclear what happened to the remaining funds.

A regrettable outcome of the huge cuts described above is that the ABC's international platforms today transmit very little bespoke content or Australian programming expressly produced or repurposed for Asia Pacific audiences. Whilst this may be of little concern to expatriate Australians, local audiences in some 50 countries and territories now rarely hear, see or read ABC material produced with a regional context in mind, rather than designed purely for Australian domestic consumption.

The negative impact of this contraction in both quantity and quality of output, especially since 2014, leaves Australia with neither a comprehensive nor a compelling voice in the Asia Pacific today. The downward trend of recent years must be arrested by significant new public investment in qualified staff, appropriate and cost-effective technology solutions and the provision of relevant targeted content for regional audiences. Without a radical change of direction, how can the ABC contend that it's still meeting its Charter obligation in this field?<sup>8</sup>

We submit the time has come to construct a new model with which to rejuvenate, sustain and grow Australia's future voice and influence in the Asia Pacific and beyond.

*(Note: Whilst ABC Annual Reports provide much of the information in Attachment 1, estimates quoted in this submission have resulted from cross-referencing information from other internal ABC sources. Further due diligence is required.)*

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> ABC Annual Reports 2013/14 & 2014/15

<sup>7</sup> Attachment 1

<sup>8</sup> ABC Act, op. cit.

## Model Criteria

The new model we propose for Australian international broadcasting is based on the following criteria:

- An international broadcasting service operated by an independent, statutory corporation or foundation with a long-term strategy and vision (not short-term expediency or 'quick fixes').
- A service operating to a Charter, based on bipartisan political agreement and supported by business and other sectors, which clearly states that the mission of Australia's future international broadcasting service is to target and influence international audiences (rather than Australian expatriates). In this digital age, the expatriate community already enjoys access to numerous alternative sources of news and information from home.
- The Charter to direct it to produce and broadcast high quality, independent, contextualised and trustworthy news, information and entertainment programs for Asia Pacific audiences via multiple digital delivery platforms. The programming content to explain and reflect contemporary Australia and its people, their multicultural way of life, democratic values and institutions as well as everyday realities, including culture, education and sport. The content would highlight the depth and diversity of engagement between Australians and the people of Asia and the Pacific - and the conversations that engagement engenders.
- The corporation or foundation to be quarantined from day-to-day partisan political and funding pressures that have thwarted efforts to produce a consistent, compelling and trusted narrative of Australia for its Asia Pacific neighbours.
- Guaranteed annual government funding in order to deliver on the Charter obligations.
- No dependence on revenue from advertising, sponsorship or promotions but with the ability, over time, to attract tax-exempt endowments from public and private benefactors including high net worth individuals, foundations, NGOs and others with a proven commitment to Australia's national interest and place in the world.
- The corporation or foundation chairperson to be an eminent and suitably-experienced individual.
- The board to comprise high-ranking nominees from the ABC, SBS, the Federal Government, business, commercial media, independent producers, educators, the tourism sector and others with relevant skills and experience.
- News and current affairs programming to be produced in association with the ABC and SBS (given their acknowledged expertise in foreign reporting and languages) but also drawing on commercial media news sources where appropriate, whilst adhering to the highest editorial principles, ethical standards and practices of independence, balance and accuracy.
- The new corporation or foundation to have a sufficient commissioning fund to enable it to buy compelling, relevant, bespoke TV, radio and online content in such genres as general entertainment, children's education, health, social welfare, music, culture, English language learning and sports. This non-news programming to be sourced from independent producers and commercial broadcasters as well the ABC and SBS.
- The new international service to draw upon and tap into relevant expertise, both inside and outside the ABC. This acknowledges the wealth of experience built up over past decades by

Radio Australia and its television counterparts, such as Australia Network, notwithstanding that much of this broadcasting expertise and talent has already been lost or, in some instances, squandered because of the ABC's past travails.

- The new international service not to be beholden to any one form of technology, retaining the flexibility to leverage changing technology options for optimum outcomes. Different markets require different technology solutions, so the new approach must involve a market-by-market strategy, not a one-size-fits-all approach.<sup>9</sup>
- The new corporation or foundation to have a strong commitment to regular research not only to record audience data, market characteristics and digital consumption trends but also to measure the effectiveness (reach and relevance) of its programming. The new service must be able to constantly demonstrate that its funding is being wisely spent in support of its Charter goals and is providing a return on investment.
- For clarity, the new corporation or foundation will not operate a news channel per se, but provide a mix of content on multiple platforms - including children's content, English language learning, entertainment and sports whilst news and current affairs remain the backbone. Programming blocks will be made available for re-distribution by regional free-to-air partners.
- The new corporation or foundation to adopt branding which best represents what Australia's new regional voice is all about and the audiences it is addressing.

## **Model Options**

We submit these models for the Review's consideration, viz:

### 1. The Status Quo

In light of past experience, as per our preceding comments, we do not consider the existing ABC-managed model to be a prudent or desirable long-term option. If not quickly rejuvenated and allocated significantly increased funding, resources and priority inside the ABC, it will surely become less and less effective and relevant over time. Nor do we consider that it meets the critical criteria of the proposed new international broadcasting service outlined above.

### 2. Subsidiary Model

Various options seeking to create a subsidiary, autonomous or arms-length corporation for international broadcasting located inside the ABC appear to have some merit.

The Australian International Broadcasting Corporation (AIBC) proposed by respected foreign correspondent and commentator Graeme Dobell is one such example.<sup>10</sup>

We question, however, whether any such body under the ABC 'umbrella' could meet all the criteria set out above, and to what extent it could be vulnerable to 'mining' by the ABC when domestic priorities outweighed international broadcasting needs, as has happened in the past.

Whilst acknowledging the very significant experience of the ABC in international broadcasting, we would argue that it is not the sole repository of expertise and talent in this field, and now is a

---

<sup>9</sup> Attachment 2

<sup>10</sup> G. Dobell, op. cit.

timely opportunity to cast a much wider net. The service needs to reflect a genuine plurality of views – including those emanating from outside the ABC – which can only be guaranteed to occur via a truly independent body established outside the purview of the national public broadcaster.

### 3. Independent Model

We submit the independent model, as proposed above, is in the best long-term interest of Australia securing a respected, admired and trusted voice for itself in an uncertain and fast-changing world.

Our model would ensure Australia offers to international audiences a plurality of views that best reflect an accurate and balanced perspective on Australia and Australians. It provides for a level of flexibility and efficiency that would guarantee the service was well placed to utilize the wide variety of media platforms accessible by current and future audiences so as to fulfil its Charter to the maximum extent possible. The independent model also ensures that any significant injection of new public funding into international broadcasting would not simply go to the ABC but would be contestable by both the commercial media sector and independent production houses.

We recognize this model, if accepted, may require amending the existing ABC Charter. If so, we would hope such amendments did not preclude the new corporation or foundation benefitting from the ABC's acknowledged international broadcasting expertise.

Our proposed model allows Australia to choose how it might best develop a commanding international voice capable of engaging and informing Asia Pacific audiences today and into the future.

### **Next Steps**

Further research is required to examine related initiatives being undertaken by other middle and smaller powers in our region (e.g. South Korea's KIBF, the foundation operating the Arirang international network, and PBCL/PasifikaTV in New Zealand) to determine whether they have relevance to the proposed new model and, if so, can be scaled to Australia's needs.

A fresh start based on the above criteria involves an operating model applicable to few, if any, current international broadcasters. We have yet to find an identical model elsewhere and accept that moving to an independent corporation or foundation presents both considerable challenges and an exciting opportunity to represent who today's Australians are, what we stand for and how we see ourselves in the Asia Pacific.

Meanwhile, international broadcasters, both major (e.g. BBC/UK, DW/Germany, BBG/USA, France Médias Monde/France, CGTN & RCI/China and NHK World/Japan) and smaller players (e.g. TVNZ & RNZPacific/New Zealand and Arirang/South Korea), continue to boost both funding and multi-platform program offerings to retain and build their respective international audiences.

Australia should not be allowed to fall any further behind.

Attachment 1

ABC International Broadcasting Selected Data 2008-2018



(Source: ABC Annual Reports; estimates as identified)

## Attachment 2

“...with our limited resources, (we) must choose from a wide variety of media used by our current and future audiences to fulfill our mission to the maximum extent possible. Radio now comes in many formats beyond shortwave: medium wave (AM), FM, satellite and cable delivery, and Internet streams. These modes often overcome many of the traditional shortcomings of shortwave, such as fading, variability in sound quality, and difficulty of tuning. We must also embrace television, as many of our audiences now turn to TV first for news and information and, of course, entertainment. The explosion of social media provides us with exciting new opportunities to complement information delivery with rich interaction and greater audience interaction, including content contribution by the audience. For many around the world, the next electronic media they acquire will be a cell phone or similar mobile device. The BBG must choose to have a commanding presence the media where our audiences are today and in the future.”

(Source: U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors (2014) *'To Be Where Our Audience Is'*, p.1 - see <https://www.bbg.gov/wp-content/media/2014/08/SW-Committee-Final-Report.pdf> )