

SUBMISSION

TO THE REVIEW OF AUSTRALIAN BROADCASTING SERVICES IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

INTRODUCTION

Australia has been broadcasting to the world using shortwave radio frequencies since the *Voice of Australia*, under the auspices of the then Australian Broadcasting Commission, was inaugurated by Prime Minister Menzies on the 20th December, 1939. Initially, the service was designed to enunciate Australia's own wartime message via the airwaves, which were then mostly dominated by Axis propaganda. Later, during the Cold War, Radio Australia (as it was then known) kept a vital freedom of expression link open for listeners in countries in Asia then under Communist control or dictatorial rule. Key target areas were China, Indonesia and Vietnam/Laos. Broadcast services were also provided via shortwave to the Pacific, especially for Australia's former colonial territory, the newly independent Papua New Guinea.

In 2017, the hierarchy of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation decided that neither its international service, Radio Australia, nor its domestic shortwave transmissions (designed for regional and outback Australia) would continue. Instead, it would rely on FM and other technologies (such as digital and the Internet) to reach its audience. Thus, listeners in remote island locations in the Pacific, once keen listeners to the shortwave signal, were immediately disadvantaged as Radio Australia programmes were then only available to them on FM transmissions. As FM relay transmitters are primarily based in urban locations (to serve larger audiences), people living in villages on isolated islands or in the mountains and valleys of Papua New Guinea lost all their immediate links with both Australia and its broadcast media output.

SITUATION

More than simply signalling the ABC's retreat from shortwave broadcasting and its Pacific audience, the ABC's management has made several other decisions which indicate that it has little interest in being part of the broader Asia-Pacific media community.

It has resigned its membership of the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union (ABU), a regional body of radio/television professional organisations which it co-founded with NHK, Japan, and has severely depleted the staffing resources and funds within its own International Department. The specialist radio content it now produces for audiences in the Pacific and beyond is minuscule. The ABC has only one journalist/correspondent based in the Pacific (in Papua New Guinea), and none on the ground in the wider Pacific area, covering countries such as Fiji, Kiribati, Tonga, Samoa and so on. Thus, Australians know more about Africa, North Asia, the USA and Europe, where the ABC has major offices, than it does about its nearest neighbours within its own geographical region.

Given this background, the Government review into Australian broadcasting services in the Asia-Pacific might well ask whether the ABC is the appropriate body to undertake future radio and television outreach to neighbouring countries.

The traditional view has always been that the ABC, as the nation's pre-eminent public broadcaster, is the logical provider of external broadcast services. As Australia's domestic media environment has changed exponentially over recent years, due to the digital revolution, and as the ABC has slashed specialist staff within its Asia-Pacific portfolio, perhaps this mandate no longer holds true.

Australia has a second public broadcaster which transmits radio broadcasts locally in 68 languages, including some from the Pacific. That organisation is the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS). As the SBS

(an Additional Full Member of the ABU) and its management and staff are attuned to the cultures, languages and mores of Asia and the Pacific, perhaps it could be a more appropriate vehicle than the domestically mono-lingual ABC for any future Australian radio/television broadcasting to the region.

THE MESSAGE

If Australia is to re-establish a radio/TV voice within the wider geographical community, what would be the reason for doing so and what message should it be sending? Does Australia wish to project its diplomatic muscle via the media, or does it simply want to add its voice to the global freedom of expression agenda? Would a renewed radio and television presence be designed to supplement the existing broadcast services of neighbouring countries (especially the small Pacific nations), or would it simply be a voice from overseas transmitted on a one-way basis into both the ether and the new digital space? Is the service merely to enable expatriates to follow sporting events or news services from home, or are we just trying to be a good neighbour to our Pacific friends?

At present, Asia is crowded with satellite television signals and digital radio transmissions. Adding Australia's presence to that cacophony is important for political, cultural, social and commercial reasons. However, in the Pacific, where both topography and small populations still bring a need for Australia's diplomatic, social, cultural and political advocacy but display clear limitations to its prospective commercial advantage, the design of transmitted material should be cognisant of specific national interests. More importantly, Australia's voice should be bold in defending press freedom and delivering a free flow of news and information on topics which might not be, for many reasons, tackled locally by journalists and other media professionals.

Australia is no longer solely an English-speaking, mono-cultural society. Similarly, the media landscape of the nation has a huge number of disparate platforms, players and opportunities. All aspects of the new media environment should be evidenced in any Australian out-reach to the world. We have a vibrant commercial radio/TV sector, an important community radio and television base, two excellent public service broadcasters, a key indigenous media body (CAAMA), a major print media sector, and a host of independent bloggers. Even newspapers and magazines are adding an audio-visual arm to their portfolios. All these voices, not just the views as espoused through ABC news and programmes, should be heard when Australia speaks to other countries. Diversity is the new currency.

PROPOSITION

The SBS should be invited to develop a specialist media unit, possibly funded through the DFAT budget, to undertake the development and transmission of a stream of Australian radio/TV content to external audiences.

The unit would operate within usual public service broadcasting principles and guidelines of editorial independence and freedom of the press. Its mandate should be clearly defined. Is the content to be transmitted simply a display of Australia's talent on a global media stage? Or is it to be a focussed signal to deliver local, language/country-relevant news and information to audiences abroad?

In an expression of Australia's diversity, the SBS unit could seek to financially contract a huge range of existing (and new) programme content from commercial and community broadcasters, the print sector, digital sources and other media entrepreneurs. As the SBS has its own news service, this could be part of the equation. It could contract current affairs material from the ABC, local cultural content from CAAMA, experimental radio from the community sector, 'live' talkback and sport from the commercial field. Distance education courses for Asia-Pacific audiences could be sought (on a commercial basis) from universities and other tertiary institutions.

The media unit would also be charged with assisting overseas broadcasters through the provision of specific training needs, seminar opportunities, equipment or engineering services. The latter could be sourced from current SBS technical providers and the commercial broadcast engineering sector, while journalism and media training should be conducted through agencies (both local and international) which carry out these tasks on a daily basis and where skilled trainers (conversant in methodologies and language skills) are evident (e.g. universities, TAFE, AFTRS, NGOs etc.)

THE TECHNOLOGY

There is no doubt that much of the world has moved away from technologies such as shortwave. However, we should be cautious about making choices which may not be successful. For example, over recent years, Norway cancelled its shortwave, mediumwave and even FM transmissions in favour of digital. The digital radio option has proved not to be attractive to local audiences and listenership has fallen dramatically.

In many countries of the Pacific, shortwave is still a very important part of the media mix. In Papua New Guinea, each Province has its own shortwave station, thus enabling the national broadcaster to deliver a signal in local languages into remote villages and valleys where illiteracy (especially amongst women) abounds, and where health/disaster/emergency information is vital to life. Both in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, the national radio stations have shortwave transmitters to ensure that their citizens nationwide can receive news and information. Thus, listeners in the Pacific are aware of shortwave radio and value the fact that they can hear programming via this technology.

Since the ABC discontinued its domestic shortwave broadcasts, a commercial radio station in North Queensland has purchased a shortwave transmitter and aerial system and is broadcasting its programmes throughout Cape York and beyond. If there is no need for this, why would a commercial operator undertake such a move?

There is no doubt that, if Australia wishes to be part of the Pacific media environment, it must return (in part) to shortwave technology, preferably DRM as used by Radio New Zealand International. Certainly, it can continue to deliver signals through FM relays in populated areas of the Pacific (i.e. capital cities) and via the Internet. It can also provide programming content (free of charge) to small broadcasters in Pacific nations. However, without shortwave, it is only doing half the job.

CONCLUSION

It is true that mobile phone coverage through the Pacific has developed dramatically in recent years, thus enabling citizens within reach of towers or with satellite technology to enjoy audio streaming services from home and abroad. However, just as, in Australia, consumers access media through mobile devices, digital systems, analogue AM radio, and other technological formats, so the remote Pacific dweller counts shortwave as a critical component in the mix.

In summary, the pre-emptive discontinuation of shortwave radio broadcasts to the Pacific has sent a poor, non-collegial national expression to our neighbours, while also disadvantaging their media choices. Establishing a completely new kind of Asia-Pacific media service needs to be undertaken in both Australia's strategic interests and as part of our commitment to those who live in circumstances where media diversity is under threat, and where opportunities for accessing independent news and information are limited, or non-existent. It is, if nothing else, part of our international duty.

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