

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

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The Secretary,  
Review of Australian Broadcasting Services in the Asia Pacific

Dear Sir / Madam

Please find attached my submission to the Review of Australian Broadcasting Services in the Asia Pacific

For many decades I have lived and worked in the Pacific region, as a community development worker, a researcher and a journalist. For this reason, my submission focusses on the Pacific islands, rather than the broader Asian region.

I currently work as a correspondent for Islands Business magazine (Fiji) and as a freelance journalist with other media organisations across the Pacific Islands. More than a decade ago, I worked as a casual employee of Radio Australia (RA). From late 2001, I worked as a Multimedia Producer, working with a team, to produce a website and CD-Rom for "Time to Talk", a 13-part radio series on governance in the Pacific, produced in English and Tok Pisin. In early 2002, I was briefly acting producer for the ABC's "Go Asia Pacific" online gateway. Between 2002 - 2005, I worked as a casual reporter for "Pacific Beat", RA's flagship program for the islands region.

This experience reaffirmed my belief in the importance of Australia's capacity to broadcast radio, TV and digital services into the region, and also to carry voices from the Pacific into Australian debates. My recommendations in this submission - about the need to re-invest in international broadcasting, dedicated staff, shortwave broadcasting and innovative content - are also based on more than thirty five years of listening to Australian and New Zealand media on radio and online while working or living overseas.

The submission is made in a personal capacity, and presents my own views rather than those of current or past employers. I would be available to speak at any public hearings that may be held as part of the inquiry.

Nicholas James MACLELLAN



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

## *1) Introduction*

The charter of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) says the corporation is “to transmit to countries outside Australia broadcasting programs of news, current affairs, entertainment and cultural enrichment that will: encourage awareness of Australia and an international understanding of Australian attitudes on world affairs and enable Australian citizens living or travelling outside Australia to obtain information about Australian affairs and Australian attitudes on world affairs.”<sup>1</sup>

Despite this obligation, a combination of government cuts and management decisions means that the ABC is no longer the leading specialist Asia Pacific broadcaster or the leading international broadcaster in the Pacific islands. At the same time, commercial and private media do not provide the dedicated services for or about the region that are important for our relationship with Pacific neighbours.

This is a matter of concern, at a time that the geo-politics of the islands region has seen the rise of “non-traditional” development partners, such as China, India and Indonesia, which are building greater links with Pacific nations and expanding their own media services in the region.<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, successive Australian governments have weakened regional initiatives to respond to poverty, development and the climate emergency, through constant funding cuts to the ABC, CSIRO, Bureau of Meteorology and other institutions working with Pacific partners. The merger of the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) into the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and multi-billion dollar cuts to the overseas aid budget over recent years have already unbalanced the institutions that implement policy in the region.

Australia’s engagement with the Asia-Pacific region is influenced by the obvious impacts of geography and proximity – it’s our region, and affects us directly. Australia plays an important role as a major power in the Pacific islands region, through trade, aid, defence, tourism and cultural relations. Australia is a member of many regional inter-governmental organisations and networks – yet most Australians are not aware of their activities, or engaged with them. Australia’s strategic role in the region is not matched by broad public awareness of the contemporary Pacific and the weakness of broadcasting in the region is crucially related to this problem.

Most people in Australia only know the islands through the prism of tourism, or distorted media images of the crises that affect the region. In spite of fine work at the Australian National University (ANU) and other institutions, Australian academic expertise on the Pacific is thinning. Today, most Australians do not have a good sense of history or

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983 – Section 6, 1(b).

<sup>2</sup> Transforming the Regional Architecture: New Players and Challenges for the Pacific Islands, Asia-Pacific Issues, no. 118, East-West Center, Honolulu, August 2015.

geography of the Pacific region, in comparison to New Zealand, which has a large Maori and Pacific Islander community.

In contrast, through media exposure, travel and education in Australian institutions, many Pacific islanders have a better knowledge of Australia than comparable Australians have of the contemporary Pacific.

When there is media coverage, the overwhelming sense of crisis presented doesn't reflect either the diversity of social, political and economic circumstances across the Pacific region, the dynamism of change, nor work being done by Pacific islanders to deal with the social, environmental and political problems affecting the region. Media commentary often under-emphasises the contribution made by the policies of donor nations, including Australia, to creating and exacerbating these problems.

In the past, Radio Australia (RA) and the ABC's international TV broadcasting were widely used around the Pacific region, with RA reaching out to isolated rural communities. But these broadcasters have no domestic lobby to protect them from government razor gangs. In recent years, government cost-cutting has set back radio and TV broadcasting into the region.<sup>3</sup>

In his remarks to the 2016 Forum leaders meeting in Pohnpei, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull pledged: "My Government recognises that Australia's interests in the region and the complexity of the challenges we face demands more engagement at every level, more integrated policy and fresh ideas. We are committed to a step-change in our engagement, to be guided by a new Pacific strategy."<sup>4</sup>

But the closure of ABC shortwave services, the loss of experienced ABC international staff and the lack of specialist content for the islands region highlights the gap between rhetoric and action.

Under the leadership of Managing Director Michelle Guthrie, the ABC has outlined plans to expand the ABC's international reach through digital services. In an August 2016 speech, Ms. Guthrie stated: "We are closely considering way in which to increase our reach in the key markets of China, Indonesia and the Pacific."<sup>5</sup>

In her speech, she noted: "In the Pacific, where there are quite different audience needs to Asia, the focus is on exploring new distribution channels to reach people and an expanded content offering for the region that would include English and Tok Pisin (or pidgin English) audio content and an enhanced Pacific Beat News service."<sup>6</sup>

But the ABC's ongoing cuts to broadcasting into the Pacific undercut this public commitment. Australia creates a strategic problem for itself when key institutions – media, universities, non-government organisations and government departments – fail to allocate the resources needed to engage with a dynamic and complex region.

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<sup>3</sup> Nic Maclellan: "The gutting of Radio Australia", Inside Story, 22 July 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull: Remarks at Pacific Islands Forum, Pohnpei, Federated States of Micronesia, 9 September 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Michelle Guthrie: "A Global ABC", Address to the 2016 Lowy Institute Media Award Dinner, Sydney, Australia, 11 August 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

## 2) *Shortwave radio*

In 2014, I travelled through the southern provinces of Vanuatu, reporting on community initiatives to prepare for natural disasters and climate change. During this trip, I visited the village of Matangi on the island of Futuna. This is one of the more isolated communities in Vanuatu, a small group of houses on a small island at the south-eastern extreme of the archipelago.

During the visit to Matangi, I met with Miranda Natuifi, a young mother who is a member of Futuna's Community Disaster Committee. The only phone service on the mountainous island does not reach her village, and she told me about the importance of the ABC's shortwave broadcasts: "We rely a lot on Radio Australia when there's a cyclone coming. We have no telephone on this side of the island and we often can't hear Radio Vanuatu."<sup>7</sup>

As government ministers and ABC management debate budgets, digitalisation and deficits, we rarely hear such views from communities affected by planned cuts to services. Whether it's the size of the aid budget or the resourcing of the ABC international services, our neighbours have little input into decisions that affect their lives.

The ABC ceased shortwave broadcasting into the Pacific islands region in January 2017, ahead of a transition to FM transmission. In its submission to the Senate inquiry on shortwave radio, the ABC argued: "Listeners in these countries have moved and are continuing to move away from traditional forms of radio listening towards internet streaming and/or listening to FM transmissions or radio streamed via mobile phones."

But the decision to end shortwave broadcasting to the Pacific is one example of the ABC misunderstanding its international audience. The decision came with little communication with audiences in the Pacific, and no detailed surveys of the number of people who rely on shortwave radio. The cuts also reflect a broader, but mistaken, view of the technological change.

The 2014 federal government efficiency review of the ABC and SBS, which was headed by the former chief financial officer of Seven West Media, Peter Lewis, recommended shutting down Radio Australia's shortwave broadcasting. "Noting shortwave is a largely superseded technology," said the review, "discontinuing this service would release resources for other purposes."<sup>8</sup>

The current shift to digital services and FM radio misses the lived realities of outlying rural communities. FM radio can be affected by bad weather conditions – yet rural communities often rely on radio for information before and after cyclones.

Beyond this, cyclones and other extreme weather events can knock down FM and phone transmitters, while shortwave remains unaffected. As a back-up, shortwave radio broadcast from Australia can complement disaster responses until local services are restored in rural communities that are already information-poor.

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<sup>7</sup> Nic Maclellan: "Preparing for cyclones Reuben, Solo, Tuni, Ula... and beyond", Inside Story, 19 March 2015 <http://insidestory.org.au/preparing-for-cyclones-reuben-solo-tuni-ula-and-beyond>

<sup>8</sup> ABC and SBS Efficiency Study, Executive Summary, 9 May 2014, p.6

For example, the Fiji government’s post-disaster assessment after Cyclone Winston reported: “Transmission towers in Koro, Vanua Balavu, Taveuni and parts of western Viti Levu were partly or totally destroyed, and transmission equipment in all four divisions was affected, resulting in a temporary loss of cellular, fixed-line, radio and TV services.”<sup>9</sup>

In reality, these broadcasts are a vital service for rural communities in neighbouring Melanesian nations. In its submission to the Lewis review, “DFAT has advised that shortwave delivery of Radio Australia provides the only current source of the service in some sensitive areas in Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea; it supports a review of more cost effective alternatives for delivery of Radio Australia, but considers that access to the service in these areas should be maintained.”<sup>10</sup>

Streaming internet into the islands region is not sufficient for the ABC to meet its charter responsibilities and the 2017 decision to end shortwave was widely criticised in the region.

Vanuatu Prime Minister Charlot Salwai called on Australia to re-introduce shortwave broadcasting, stating: ‘My government understands that removing Radio Australia shortwave to Vanuatu could cost many, many lives in the likelihood of a major natural disaster like Tropical Cyclone Pam in 2015.’<sup>11</sup>

Monica Miller, Chair of the Pacific Freedom Forum, noted: “There seems to be no logic or connection with realities facing Pacific listeners and audiences across the region who will be effectively be cut off from news, information, and lifesaving information during disasters.

She added: “It’s clear that no thought was given to the link between disaster communications and this service, or even the fact that FM is largely unreliable in bad weather and only available in urban areas. It’s a slap in the face for the millions who’ve connected to Australia and to regional news through this service, because they are unlikely to be the ones targeted in the new digital content offerings being touted by ABC.”<sup>12</sup>

Veteran journalist Graeme Dobell, who has covered the Asia-Pacific region for the ABC, Radio Australia and a range of other broadcasters, noted: “Killing shortwave disregards—disenfranchises—an unknown number of listeners. As broadcasting policy, it’s highly questionable. As strategy, it’s dumb—another bout of recurring Oz amnesia about its South Pacific role, responsibilities and history.”<sup>13</sup>

## Recommendation

- The ABC should invest more in its international service to meet the needs of all listeners, not just urban dwellers and Australian expats.

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<sup>9</sup> Government of Fiji: Cyclone Winston Post Disaster Needs Assessment 2016

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.6.

<sup>11</sup> Letter to the Senate Standing Committee inquiry into Senator Xenophon’s Bill to restore shortwave, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Cited in “Save lifesaving shortwave radio to the Pacific”, Change.org petition,

<https://www.change.org/p/abc-chair-hon-james-spigelman-save-lifesaving-shortwave-radio-to-the-pacific>

<sup>13</sup> Graeme Dobell: Silencing Australia’s shortwave voice in the South Pacific, ASPI Strategist, 19 December 2016

- Shortwave broadcasting should be re-introduced, targeting audiences in rural and remote communities in Melanesia, which are often under-served by local media, FM transmission and digital services.

### ***3) Re-building a Pacific network of correspondents***

Unlike New Zealand, commercial media organisations and newspapers do not have specialists dedicated to the coverage of the Pacific Islands. Not one daily newspaper in Australia has a dedicated Pacific Islands correspondent. Even across the ABC, there is a dearth of regular reporting on island affairs.

The skills required for detailed coverage of the twenty-four countries in the islands region cannot easily be found in press gallery reporters who accompany Australian politicians on whirlwind visits to the islands. With a few honourable exceptions, Canberra-based reporters going to the annual Pacific Islands Forum are poorly briefed, with little knowledge of the region.

People broadcasting, writing or reporting on the Pacific need the resources to get out into the region. But with only one overseas correspondent in Port Moresby, there is little effective coverage of the wider Pacific region. This problem has been exacerbated by the closure of the ABC bureau in New Zealand. For this reason, there is a need to re-build a network of dedicated expertise on the Pacific islands, which cannot be developed simply in Southbank, Ultimo or Canberra.

New investment in dedicated reporters and correspondents would benefit the ABC's domestic audience, as well as its overseas audience. The ABC's domestic service has long relied on the expertise of former RA staff who have left the ABC over the last five years, including Radio Australia's Pacific correspondent Campbell Cooney, business reporter Jemima Garrett, Pacific Beat presenter Bruce Hill and Australian Network's Sean Dorney, who worked for many years in Papua New Guinea, and was one of Australia's most experienced Pacific affairs reporters.

The loss of more experienced staff from ABC International has meant that the woeful coverage of the Pacific islands in the Australian media is further weakened. At the time of the 2014 cuts, ABC Chairman Jim Spiegelman acknowledged: "A particularly significant loss was the considerable reduction in our specialist journalist capacity...we lost something like 1,000 years of journalist experience, much of it specialised in Asia and the Pacific."<sup>14</sup>

There are many excellent Pacific journalists working for private and government broadcasters across the region, but budgets are tight and resources for regional and global coverage hard to come by.

Journalists in the region are often faced with government or military censorship, limited advertising, tough defamation laws and a complex cultural environment for investigative journalism; to have stories broadcast by Australian or NZ media allows them to follow up issues that may otherwise be too hot to handle.

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<sup>14</sup> James Spiegelman: ABC Services in the Asia-Pacific, Address by the Chairman, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Asia Society Australia, 8 December 2014

## Recommendation

- The ABC and other media organisations in Australia must re-invest significant resources to re-build a network of dedicated staff with expertise on the Pacific islands.
- Staff must also be provided with increased budgets, training and technical equipment to travel in the region and report on key regional summits (like the Pacific Islands Forum), elections and cultural events like the Pacific Arts Festival.
- The ABC should look for opportunities for co-productions with Pacific island journalists and broadcasters, drawing on local expertise and providing practical, hands-on mentoring rather than formal training programs.

### 4) *Specialist content*

There's also a need for specialist reporting and long-form analysis of a region that has vital strategic, commercial and cultural importance for Australia.

In the past, RA staff like Clement Paligaru, Heather Jarvis, Isabelle Genoux and other talented reporters crafted radio series including “Carving Out” and “Time to Talk” (a twelve-part radio series and website on governance in the Pacific, published and broadcast in English and Tok Pisin).<sup>15</sup> Innovative content of this kind can only be produced by journalists with cultural understanding, personal relationships and a contact book developed through years of hard grind and travel across the region.

It is a tragedy that ABC's international coverage no longer has the staff or financial resources to produce innovative and widely appreciated content on this scale.

The ABC should also draw more on the knowledge and connections of the Pacific diaspora communities living in Australia. The 2018 decision to begin ‘Pacific Mornings’ - the first program in English for a Pacific audience with an Australian/Pasifika presenter - is a welcome step.<sup>16</sup> But even with this new initiative, original programming for the Pacific is limited to just 18 hours a week.

The new line up has also seen significant challenges, including co-ordination between the morning program produced in Sydney and the flagship news and current affairs program “Pacific Beat” produced in Melbourne; the loss of long serving Pacific Beat presenters, and limited budgets to travel and broadcast from the region.

## Recommendations

- Rather than re-broadcasting programs prepared for an Australian audience, more content must be made specifically for audiences in the islands region, responding to their diverse interests and needs.

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<sup>15</sup> Disclosure: The author worked for Radio Australia in 2001-02 to produce the website that accompanied the “Time to Talk” radio broadcasts.

<sup>16</sup> For discussion, see Nic Maclellan: “Shake up for Radio Australia - New voices for Pacific broadcasts”, Islands Business, December 2017

- ABC’s broadcasting to the islands region must be boosted to include a diversity of programming, including independent news and current affairs programs, arts and cultural programs, children’s programming, documentaries, entertainment, sport, science, business, as well as English language-learning programs.

### ***5) Foreign language broadcasting***

The reduction of services in 2014-17 saw fewer positions in RA’s international service, damaging broadcasting in Chinese, Indonesian, French as well as the Tok Pisin service, which provides a vital service for our closest neighbours, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. The restructuring of this service after 2014 saw staff reduced to just two, with management arguing that “Language services in Tok Pisin will be delivered through a mix of reduced original content coupled with translated ABC content.”<sup>17</sup>

In past decades, Pearson Vetuna, Carolyn Tiriman and Kenya Kala and other Australian-based RA broadcasters were treated like rock stars when they visited their homeland. Proposals simply to translate ABC news into Tok Pisin hardly meet the ABC’s charter obligation for innovative international broadcasting.

The closure of RA’s French language service in 2017 is another blow, coming as the French dependencies of New Caledonia, French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna are building closer economic and political ties with Australia and the Pacific Islands Forum.

As a correspondent for *Islands Business* magazine, I regularly travel around New Caledonia, one of Australia’s closest neighbours. In past years, a number of indigenous Kanaks mentioned items from RA’s French language service that they’d heard or seen online. Australian French-language broadcasting provided a crucial alternative in a media landscape dominated by French government media and a daily newspaper that campaigns against independence.

This is all the more important as New Caledonia is moving towards a referendum on self-determination in November 2018. Australian audiences would be hard-pressed to find any coverage of this crucial decision on a new political relationship with France, and a dedicated French language service would help bridge this gap.

Ironically, Radio Australia was created during the Second World War to complement Australia’s first diplomatic presence in the Asia-Pacific region: a consulate in New Caledonia established to support Gaullist efforts to overthrow the pro-Vichy governor.

### **Recommendations**

- The ABC should re-invest in staff and budgets to enable increased broadcasting in French and Tok Pisin.

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<sup>17</sup> Cited in Ashlee Betteridge: Radio Australia and Australia Network ‘gutted’ as ABC cuts 80 staff, devPolicy Blog, 22 July 2014.

- The ABC should resume Radio Australia’s French language service, especially as New Caledonia and French Polynesia have now joined the Pacific Islands Forum as full members, and Australia is increasing its strategic engagement with France.
- The ABC should also strengthen relationships with stringers throughout the region, to improve its network of on-the-ground reporting alongside dedicated ANC Pacific correspondents.

## ***6) Looking beyond digital***

The Australian media’s current digital fetish has led to new services like the creation of the ABC’s “Australia Plus expats app” (available in both iOS and Android), which can assist Australian expatriates in the Pacific. But many of these services do little for the rural audiences that have long relied on radio programming in Tok Pisin, French and English.

The Australian government’s 2014 revocation of the Australian Network TV contract may be the original sin, but the gutting of Radio Australia suggests ABC management underestimates the importance of outreach into the Pacific. Whether it is news, English language lessons, cyclone warnings or the latest cultural programs, there’s a significant audience for Radio Australia – especially in outlying islands and rural communities with limited access to the internet.

While there are alternative broadcast and internet services in the crowded Asian media market, the range of options in the small island states is much more limited. Many Pacific media organisations relay news and features from Radio Australia and Radio New Zealand International, providing a crucial window to the world that local media can’t hope to match.

Across the Pacific, many people now have access to digital phones and there is steady growth of internet access in capital cities and towns. But the focus on digital services ignores the realities facing many poorer rural communities. Power supply is an ongoing concern, bandwidth is too narrow to use radio streaming, while daily access to the Internet is very expensive.

In spite of broadband advances in urban centres and the spread of digital phones, the vast majority of Pacific islanders still rely on radio for their information, and the loss of shortwave and satellite rebroadcasting is being sorely felt.

### **Recommendation**

- Don’t give up on radio, even given the spread of digital services in the islands.