

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

From:

Sean Dorney



Who am I: For a total of 17 years (1979-1984 & 1987-1998) I was the ABC's Papua New Guinea Correspondent based in Port Moresby. From 1999 until 2006, I was the ABC and Radio Australia's Pacific Correspondent based in Brisbane travelling on average seven days a month to island nations throughout the Pacific. From 2006 until 2014, I worked as a video journalist covering the Pacific island nations for the then ABC international service, Australia Network. In late 2014, I was made redundant after the ABC's contract with the Government for supplying the Australia Network service was terminated. I am now retired but do some work for the Lowy Institute for International Policy as a Lowy Institute Non-Resident Fellow in its Melanesia program. I have written three books on Papua New Guinea and Australia's relationship with our former colony.

Scope of my submission: I will limit my short submission to the two subjects initially referred to in the review analysis, the:

- coverage and access of existing Australian media services in the Asia Pacific region; and
- use and value of Australian shortwave technology in the Asia Pacific region.

Existing Australia media services in the Pacific:

My comments will deal with the Pacific because apart from one reporting trip as a video journalist to East Timor, I claim no great knowledge of Asia.

Prior to the cancellation of the Australia Network contract, Australia had achieved an enviable reputation as the premier international broadcaster to the Pacific Island nations. In almost every capital I visited I could watch Australia Network. Radio Australia had dramatically more penetration thanks to its combination of FM transmitters in the main towns and SW broadcasts which reached the most remote islands and hamlets.

Unfortunately, almost all of that was thrown away in a few short years. The cancellation of the Australia Network contract in 2014 did not only mean the loss of dedicated news and current affairs programs dealing with the region on television. Because the ABC had combined the newsrooms of Australia Network and Radio Australia, there was collateral damage to Radio Australia as well. As one small example, although my primary role at the time had been preparing news and current affairs items on Pacific issues for television, I also contributed

extensively to RA's news and current affairs programs. Radio Australia also suffered because the ABC diverted funds in an effort to keep some international television service going.

Then, in 2017, the ABC completely abandoned shortwave broadcasting. I was dumfounded by that decision as I had spent so much of my career travelling to so many places where RA's services were often all that was available and were highly regarded. Indeed, in many places those broadcasts were seen as essential, trustworthy and reliable. Everywhere I went in the Pacific, the recognition factor was huge. In fact, some people were incredibly disappointed when they met me face to face. I had captained the Papua New Guinea Rugby League team, the Kumuls, in the 1970s and those who knew that and had listened to my voice for years seemed to have developed a mental image of me which was totally shattered by the reality.

Radio Australia is a much, much reduced service these days available from a few FM transmitters with limited reach in a limited number of Pacific countries. Radio New Zealand International has a significantly better profile in the region these days than Radio Australia.

Use and value of Australian shortwave technology in the Asia Pacific region:

Shortwave technology is far from a spent force in the Pacific despite what some people in the ABC management apparently believe. My wife Pauline is from Manus Island. She is a former radio broadcaster on both Radio Manus and on the PNG National Broadcasting Commission's national service. In May of this year, we went back to Pauline's village, Tulu, which is about two-and-a-half hours by motor canoe west of the provincial capital, Lorengau. The ABC's Foreign Correspondent program accompanied us. Pauline said she noticed that there was something missing. She had not been home for about three years. Then, after several days, she realised what it was. No radio!

Pauline's brother, Bernard, Tulu's paramount chief, always used to listen to Radio Australia and people used to gather around his radio to listen to the major news bulletins and the current affairs program, *Pacific Beat*. No more. The closure of RA's transmitters has cut Tulu off from what was a vital link that provided the people with news about what was going on in the world, the Pacific, Australia and even Papua New Guinea itself.

About 80% of Papua New Guineans still live in their villages and that is an audience no longer being served by Australian international broadcasting.

Conclusion:

I have deliberately kept this individual submission quite short. I have joined with other concerned people to contribute to a much more detailed and substantial submission which I believe has already been forwarded to the International Broadcasting Review.