

**STAFF AND STUDENTS OF THE
THE UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC
JOURNALISM PROGRAMME
SUBMISSION**

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

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BACKGROUND

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation ceased shortwave broadcasting in the Asia-Pacific region on January 31, 2017, ahead of a reported transition to FM transmission. The move is apparently in line with the Australian broadcaster's commitment to dispense outdated technology and expand its digital content offerings including DAB+ digital radio, online and mobile services, together with FM services for international audiences (Arts, 2018). By some estimates, the closure of the transmission is expected to affect 10 million listeners.

The USP Journalism Programme under the School of Language, Arts and Media is based at Laucala Campus in Suva, Fiji. The programme has produced more than 200 graduates working in over 30 media organisations in 10 Pacific countries. Many graduates have become influential journalists and communication specialists in the Pacific region. The USP Journalism Students Association has more than 110 members currently studying journalism at USP, with a common interest to develop a career in this field.

The USP Journalism staff and the USP Journalism Students Association (JSA) share the concerns expressed by individuals and major organisations across the region regarding the end of ABC's shortwave broadcasting in the Asia-Pacific region. The Pacific Islands News Association (PINA) on December 2016 dubbed the shortwave service a "valuable and vital source of information". Then PINA president Moses Stevens lamented the closure of the service as the end of an era in regional broadcasting for almost 80 years, when it had been the lifeline for many Pacific rural communities for vital emergency information (PINA, 2016). On January 31, 2017, RNZ reported that the closure had impacted thousands of people in remote parts of the Solomons—From Choiseul to Malaita, and as far as South-east Tikopia (RNZ, 2017).

Radio Australia has been a lifeline in more ways than one: The Pacific Media Alliance said the closure left people throughout the region without a service that has catered for a multitude of essential needs: from being one of the few sources of transparent news media in the Solomon Islands, to a lifesaving warning system in Vanuatu, which has suffered from numerous disasters in recent years. During Fiji's military coup ABC's shortwave broadcasts provided much-needed independent coverage of unfolding events (Porter, 2017).

Transparency International's Ruth Liloqula said ABC was a valuable platform to get her message across because the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation was government-owned, and its reports lacked depth and substance compared with the "tough questions" asked by ABC (Zealand, 2017). Vanuatu's Trade Commissioner to Australia, Donald Pelam, appealed to the Australian Government not to cut the service, saying it would be a "really big disaster", while former ABC Pacific correspondent Sean Dorney called the closure "baffling" and an "Australian foreign affairs misstep" (Armbruster, 2017).

On June 22, it was revealed that a Chinese station had taken over some of the shortwave radio frequencies once used by the ABC in the Pacific region (Bainbridge, Graue, & Zhou, 2018).

OUR RESPONSE

Vital source of information/Lifeline for Pacific communities

- **The USP Journalism staff and the USP Journalism Students Association agree that the closure greatly affects Pacific communities who rely on international broadcasters such as Radio Australia and Radio New Zealand for independent news and vital emergency information. Given the geographical landscape of the Pacific region, it is our view that radio remains the most effective and efficient means of communication and source for information, particularly in areas that are under-resourced and challenged by development and sustainability issues.**
- **Closing the service breaks a vital and long-standing cultural and educational link between Australia and the Pacific that took decades to establish. For example, USP staff and students use Radio Australia for research, education and to keep up with**

the news in the region. Radio Australia is only one of two major broadcasters to provide a daily snapshot of important developments in our part of the world, the other being Radio New Zealand International. During times of political upheavals, coups and uprisings, such as in Fiji and the Solomon Islands, when the media and the people were subdued and silenced; when tyranny reigned, Radio Australia kept pumping out news and information independently. Besides everyday listeners, governments and decision-makers in the region, who needed reliable information, tuned in. Now that the service is closed, there will be no such lifeline in future.

- Radio Australia is by no means perfect—besides using it as an example on how to report to the Pacific, we at USP Journalism have at times used it as an example of how NOT to report the Pacific. But by and large, Radio Australia is a trusted, reliable and valuable journalistic source. It's unfathomable that a government with such a high stake/investment in democracy, human rights and development in the region, has taken this step, which undermines its own principles and interests in the region. As we have heard, China Radio International has taken over Radio Australia's shortwave frequencies in the Pacific and Asia.
- Besides pragmatic reasons, there are compelling humanitarian issues at stake. During natural disasters such as cyclones and tsunamis, Radio Australia has a sterling record of providing critical coverage that has supported national and international relief efforts (including the Australian government's) and saved lives. When Vanuatu was hit by a Category 5 tropical cyclone in 2015, many local communications infrastructure were destroyed. ABC's shortwave was a vital link, as it had been during so many other natural disasters in the region. This includes the recent PNG earthquake disaster, where it provided crucial coverage (Armbruster, 2017).
- It seems quite imprudent, if not cruel, to close the service when it might be needed most: One of the gravest threats to the Pacific is extreme weather events caused by global warming. Cyclones, already a major hazard, are expected to intensify in future. Tropical Cyclone Winston, which struck Fiji and Tonga in February 2016, was the strongest Southern Hemisphere cyclone on record. It claiming 44 lives, demolishing livelihoods, destroying homes, and damaging the nation's all-important sugar crop. The damage totalled \$1.4 billion—more than a third of Fiji's GDP. Dr Colin Tukuitonga, the Director General of the Pacific Community, estimates that cyclone losses in the Pacific amounted to some \$10 billion in 2009-10 alone. This is 20-30 per cent of the GDP (See Singh, Naidu, 2018).
- The national broadcasters in island countries like the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, to name two, are controlled by their governments, which affects their ability to provide independent news. Moreover, these broadcaster are struggling financially and organizationally. They are ill-equipped to provide vital coverage during natural disasters—at a time when the threat from cyclones are forecast to increase (Singh, Naidu, 2018). Radio Australia filled a major gap in more ways than one. It provided a valuable service to some of the most remote parts of the Pacific, such in the Solomon Islands interior, Choiseul. These communities only found out that there was no tsunami threat after a recent earthquake by listening to ABC. Others such as human rights activist, Ruth Kissam, used the ABC platform to share messages about anti-sorcery and this, she said, had been effective (RNZ, 2017).

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATIONS

- Radio Australia's shortwave service spanned a wide region, from West Papua to Nauru, Micronesia and the Marshall Islands, Cook Islands and French Polynesia, Vanuatu, PNG, Solomon Islands and Fiji. While the ABC has admitted that it does not have data on the number of listeners who use the service because of the nature of the technology and the remote locations of shortwave users (ABC, 2016), it is understood as many as 10 million people in the Pacific are affected by this closure.
- Radio Australia connects Asia-Pacific culturally- like no other medium. During natural disasters like cyclones, & man-made ones like coups, with national media weakened, Radio Australia provided a lifeline through independent, round-the-clock reporting. We agree with Australian freelance journalist and former ABC reporter Ms Jemima Garrett's statement that the Australian media, in the form of the ABC's international services (Radio Australia, Australia Plus TV, and digital and online services) has played a crucial role in promoting debate, transparency and good governance in the Pacific and Asia. Cuts to Radio Australia leave a huge vacuum in their wake.
- We also agree that ABC has provided a powerful role-model and, through its presence and reporting, empowered journalists in the region, to tackle stories that are difficult but of important public interest. Removing the ABC removes a valuable educational/information tool for the Pacific news media sector, which is already facing major struggles with regards to capacity-building, lack of resources, draconian legislation and mounting political pressure. The vulnerable but vital Pacific news media sector loses a major ally with the closure of the service.
- USP Journalism staff and students endorse the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's submission to the Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee Inquiry into the ABC Amendment (Restoring Shortwave Radio) Bill 2017, which states that:
 - *ABC's services to the Pacific provide a valuable channel for delivering news, Australian perspectives and content, and advancing Australian public diplomacy in the Pacific. ABC broadcasts have also served during emergencies to deliver warnings and updates, in complement to national disaster warning systems (Australia, 2017).*
- We believe ABC's shortwave exit has created communication blind spots and therefore, we strongly encourage the ABC to maintain broadcasts throughout the region that maintain quality of service for Pacific audiences.
- The ABC's reach extends far beyond Australia. ABC is also a crucial part of the Pacific media landscape.
- It is our view that ABC's sustained coverage of major events, issues and disasters in the Pacific region has played a vital role in keeping people informed about events that affect their lives. This independent coverage/reporting should continue unabated for the sake of democracy, freedom of speech, economic development and decision-making processes, as well as for humanitarian reasons.

DISCLAIMER:

The views expressed in this submission are those of the USP Journalism Programme staff and students. The views are not necessarily that of the USP.

We agree to allow our submission to be made public.

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