



Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
Department of Communications and the Arts

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To Whom This May Concern:

REVIEW OF AUSTRALIAN BROADCASTING SERVICES IN THE ASIA PACIFIC

MEAA¹ welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to this review, which comes at a time of close analysis about how Australia should engage with neighbouring nations and secure peaceable and constructive relations.

The broadcast of Australian media into the Asia Pacific region has historically been synonymous with the ABC's delivery of these services.² The now dilapidated state of these services is a product of the cancellation of the Australia Network contract in 2014 and the staff and funding cuts (now totalling over \$350 million) that have followed.

The ABC ended its shortwave transmission of Radio Australia to the Pacific region in January 2017. This followed the cancellation of shortwave services to significant parts of Asia in preceding years.

The termination of these services was based on the flawed notion that satellite and internet services, together with FM transmissions, would completely supersede shortwave capabilities.^{3 4}

¹ The Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance (MEAA) is the union and industry advocate for Australia's creative professionals. The MEAA Media section includes journalists and others who work in the media industry.

² Other than the Seven Network's carriage of these services from 1998 to 2001.

³ This view took root in the Lewis Efficiency Review of the national broadcasters in 2014, which asserted that shortwave [was] a 'largely superseded technology' that could be replaced in 'target countries' through 'FM transmission'.

⁴ On the available evidence, shortwave transmissions cannot be entirely replaced by alternative, newer technologies.

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MEAA believe that the termination of shortwave services was not a question of technology, but one of resource allocation within the ABC. In the context of the ABC's international footprint being degraded on a regular basis, the ABC's progressive abandonment of the remnants of its shortwave broadcasting services was unsurprising.

Value of Shortwave

Notwithstanding the rationale for these service cuts, it seems clear that shortwave services have ongoing currency in the Asia Pacific region, especially in remote, non-urban and economically deprived or sparsely populated regions.

Shortwave frequencies, classified as 'high' frequency, follow the curvature of the earth, which allows to interference – whether natural or state-sanctioned; it has superior reach compared to the FM frequency; and it has not been displaced in poorer Pacific nations where internet and satellite services are still very limited.

Access to internet and satellite resources in the Asia Pacific, especially the Pacific, is largely concentrated in urban centres. In addition, the necessary satellite, internet or FM transmissions are either not available or unable to service sparsely populated areas. (The *attached* map indicates that the population density is low in much of the Pacific region.)

Shortwave radio may be the propeller-driven plane in a jet engine era, but its uses have not been exhausted.

Emergency Assistance

Perhaps the most direct benefit of Australian shortwave broadcasting is transmission of information and directions during periods of natural disaster. The absence of reliable and timely information during events such as the recent earthquake in Papua New Guinea – together with the apparent general increase in extreme weather events – should compel a comparatively wealthy nation like Australia to adopt a sentinel-type role in our region.

Other Nations

There is no common position among foreign governments about maintaining shortwave transmissions. Germany, Sweden, Spain and Canada have terminated shortwave transmissions; however, the BBC, Japan, Indonesia, the Philippines, New Zealand and, of course, China, have kept their shortwave services.

We note here that the termination of shortwave services in Europe and North America is not directly comparable to the position in the Asia Pacific due to the abundance of infrastructure in the Northern Hemisphere servicing higher population levels with greater density.

China Syndrome

As was recently reported in the Australian media, the shortwave frequencies formerly occupied by the ABC are now being used by China Radio International (CRI). CRI has substantial resources with which to prosecute its multi-language, 'soft power', mandate. CRI uses very high powered shortwave transmitters, together with satellite and internet services.

As the Australian Government's 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper stated, Australia and China have different interests, values and political and legal systems. The evidence of China's increasing interest and activity in the Asia Pacific, particularly the Pacific, seems to grow by the week.

As Stewart Firth has stated:

"East Asian political, investment, trade and commercial presence in the Pacific Islands is now on such a scale as to reshape the region. Pacific Island governments enjoy a new freedom in foreign policy. But liberal democratic norms might well come under increasing threat. Democracy in the Pacific Islands has never been a carbon copy of its Western counterparts, but the divergence is set to grow wider under new pressures."

There are potential conflicts and clashes of values in much of the Pacific, including instability in Nauru, Fiji's 'democracy by military permission'⁵, the upcoming Bougainville independence referendum and Australia's broader relationship with Papua New Guinea. There is also the relatively weak standing of women in the region and persistent tensions about the separation of powers, especially between government and the judiciary.

Press Freedom

Muted democracy throughout the Asia Pacific is demonstrated by various nation states' treatment of journalists and their attitudes towards freedom of expression and democratic rule making.

According to the International Federation of Journalists, over 600 journalists have been killed in the Asia Pacific region since 1990.⁶

A recent report in *Time* magazine asserted that progress towards democracy in numerous Asian countries over several decades is now being reversed. *Time* said that in 2017, 'all 10 member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations landed in the bottom third of *Reporters Without Borders* annual World Press Freedom Index of 180 countries'.⁷ *Time* highlighted well-documented unrest in Thailand, Myanmar, the Philippines and Cambodia, with the latter cutting more than 30 radio frequencies to prevent broadcasts from Radio Free Asia and Voice of America.

Political discord and poor observance of human rights is also taking hold at a time when media companies throughout the world are enduring severe financial downturns and unable to maintain critical output of public interest journalism stories. Where the number of media voices is reduced, Governments are more able to exert their own influence and impose new media controls.

⁵ See Stewart Firth, *Instability in the Pacific Islands: A Status Report*, Lowy Institute, 4 June 2018

⁶ Source: International Federation of Journalists, Asia-Pacific, July 2018

⁷ Press Freedom Is Under Attack Across Southeast Asia. Meet the Journalists Fighting Back, Solomon, Feliz et al, *Time*, 22 June 2018

Summary

It is not clear whether this review is a forum in which to canvas all that has been lost from Australia's broadcasting to the Asia Pacific region over the past few years. For the record, MEAA support the restoration of television and radio broadcasting services as they were inherited by the current Government in late 2013. Given the Government's present attitude to the ABC, we hold little hope that restoration on this scale will occur anytime soon.

At the very least, MEAA supports the development of a coherent Australian strategy, underpinned by new funding, that is aimed at aiding our regional neighbours' access to reliable coverage of affairs of state and to aid steps toward democracy and equality for the region's citizens.

Sober and objective Australian coverage of events in our region is especially important in times of unrest. There are many messages and geopolitical benefits that can be gleaned from Australia's successful democracy and the virtues of a free press.

Renewed services should have the capability to transmit to all parts of the Asia Pacific region in key languages, especially those where democratic challenges are greatest.

The technology employed in delivering these services should be resistant to interference, deliberate or otherwise. It should also be accessible to our neighbours in small and remote locations, where population levels or local economies cannot support internet or satellite services.

In this regard, funding should be reinstated for shortwave radio broadcasting, which the ABC estimated would cost \$2.8 to \$4 million per annum in its May 2017 submission to the Inquiry into the *ABC Amendment (Restoring Shortwave Radio) Bill* 2017.

MEAA believe that reinvestment in Asia Pacific communications is consistent with the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper and the recently released document, *'Stepping Up Australia's Pacific Engagement'* and its objective of increasing support for a more stable and prosperous Pacific. It is also consistent with the views that underpin the *Free and Open Indo-Pacific*, which has been revived as a counter to China's Belt and Road Initiative.

MEAA believes that an accountable, publicly-funded and charter-based public broadcaster should carry out any enhanced broadcasting services.

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