

Committee Secretary  
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Although I am on the Board of the (now) only Australian international shortwave broadcaster, I do not write on behalf of Reach Beyond (Australia), but rather offer a personal perspective. I am a barrister, and an amateur radio operator who regularly uses shortwave to speak to friends in America, Britain, Spain, New Zealand and other countries, and who listens shortwave broadcasts.

In 2015 I attended the B15 High Frequency Consultative Conference (HFCC) which was held in Brisbane under the auspices of Reach Beyond (Australia). The HFCC is a sector member of the International Telecommunication Union in Geneva. The HFCC promotes a balanced system of content delivery that would “prevent a hasty and possibly irreversible demise of traditional sound radio broadcasting from terrestrial shortwave transmitters.” The function the Conference serves is as a forum for the cooperative allocation of frequencies to national and licensed private international shortwave broadcasters to ensure that interference is minimised.

The HFCC believes in the synergy of delivery platforms and not competition between them.

At the Conference, I sat next to Russia’s representative, and there were many from around the world who attended in a spirit of co-operation – giving and taking in a manner which was to my mind remarkable given the limited spectrum resource available and the competing national interests. It is worthwhile reading the ABC presentation made by Gary Baxter to the Conference at <http://www.hfcc.org/B15/> which highlights the reductions to Radio Australia’s services even then.

The Conference is perhaps only a procedural aspect of how the spectrum is allocated, but the cooperation between broadcasters has resulted in informal agreements between some broadcasters as to the carriage of programs in the event of natural disasters causing damage to transmitting sites, and also, I understand, cooperation between broadcasters in our region in the event of a disaster in a particular country with news and information broadcast from outside the affected area.

The willingness of a stable and peaceful democracy like Australia to broadcast domestic and international news in an “Australian” manner acts as “soft diplomacy” constantly reinforcing to our near and distant neighbours that we are a peaceful, friendly country and ally. This seems to me to be appropriately characterised as the business of Government, rather than as unwarranted interference with a management decision. It may perhaps justify a larger allocation of funds to Radio Australia.

The people of the Pacific, India, Japan, Korea, Myanmar and elsewhere around the world, particularly in areas with limited access to digital communications, listen to Radio Australia. A proportion of these have the opportunity to write to Radio Australia (and to Reach Beyond) with signal reports, seeking QSL cards, or they simply send letters. They listen to the broadcasts to stay in touch with news and volunteer information about the strength and readability of the signal, often providing personal insights into what the station means to them. This information is easily verifiable and involves many more than a “small group of fishermen” mentioned dismissively in one submission to this Senate Committee. It is important that we, as a stable Western democracy in the Pacific (dare I say the premier democracy) provide true and unbiased news to our neighbours and those we want to be our friends. It is worth \$1.5M - far more in my view. We have the opportunity to build trust between our country and the citizens of countries who may only receive biased and selective news locally, and who do not see our news to be propaganda. This may also raise the bar for our National broadcaster.

I believe we have an obligation to the world which properly met will pay dividends. Satellites and digital communications are certainly more modern and provide incredible opportunities, but they are also subject (sometimes easily) to manipulation, denial of service, State censorship, natural disasters, military action.

Locally, one cable damaged can plunge an area into communications blackout – and it is precisely when cyclones or floods or fires or earthquakes affect an area that it loses its ability to communicate except by shortwave. *Independence Day 2* (for all its faults) has the world communicating by shortwave when the satellites are destroyed. Science fiction yes, but satellites can in reality go out of service (particularly if they are not our satellites). The ionosphere is always present. Although it is subject to seasonal vagaries it is reliable on the various international shortwave (and other) bands and is well used.

Presently China dominates the shortwave spectrum. It seems to place value in shortwave to provide news and its political perspective.

In my view, a complementary approach is a better model. Both digital and shortwave. At Reach Beyond we have as a Board recently considered digital media and the longevity and effectiveness of shortwave reaching (in our case) 29 language groups, particularly in terms of coverage for dollars spent. We concluded that it is still the most economical way to reach the largest number of people. We as a country should not throw out a form of communication which is economically, politically and socially effective in terms of coverage for dollars spent, and in the appreciation it generates, not only of those in remote areas in Australia, but also in the Asia Pacific and wider regions.

We are one vast country in which our existing shortwave transmitters can broadcast to the entire continent, and the world, to simple receivers which do not rely on a paid data plan with private providers for data downloads or expensive satellite receiving equipment or

infrastructure, and to whom news and weather may inform decisions to bring in crops or muster cattle or to travel safely.

As a matter of policy we should have a shortwave broadcasting capacity which can only effectively be maintained by regular broadcasting. To my mind proposed s.27A is a minimum.

Stephen Coleman