

Graeme Dobell
Journalist Fellow
Australian Strategic Policy Institute

**ABC shortwave in the South Pacific:
From Exit to Engagement, from Retreat to Renewal**

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**Inquiry into the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Restoring
Shortwave Radio) Bill 2017**

Graeme Dobell, a journalist for 45 years, has been reporting on Australian and international politics, foreign affairs and defence, and the Asia Pacific since 1975. He worked as a reporter for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation for 33 years, 25 of those years with Radio Australia. Email:

Summary

1. Silencing Australia's shortwave voice in the South Pacific

Killing shortwave disregards – disenfranchises – an unknown number of listeners in Papua New Guinea and the South Pacific. Shortwave isn't 'outdated technology' in the South Pacific. That's a developed country view. For the South Pacific, shortwave is cheap, low tech, resilient, vital in emergencies, and still used beyond the cities. Shortwave can save lives.

2. Use a shortwave U-turn to re-engage with the South Pacific

Over the past decade, the ABC has scaled back its role in the South Pacific, making broadcasting cuts that will:

- cost lives when disaster hits
- reduce Australia's central role in South Pacific media
- dismantle Radio Australia (RA) as an instrument of Australian assistance, influence and soft power
- weaken Australia's strategic, diplomatic and economic policies in the Islands

The ABC should return to the centre of the South Pacific media landscape, not shrink towards the exit. And the rebuild should have a special focus on Papua New Guinea.

3. Australia's enduring South Pacific interests

Australia wants a leadership role in the South Pacific, a fundamental foreign policy interest explicitly stated in the Australian Constitution.

Australia's 2016 Defence White Paper gives a defence and security guarantee that stretches from Timor-Leste through Papua New Guinea to all of the South Pacific. Australia offers its strategic weight, proximity and resources to be the South Pacific's 'principal security partner'.

4. The ABC in the South Pacific: From Exit to Engagement, from Retreat to Renewal

The ABC exits the region as South Pacific need increases. The ABC forgets its history in the South Pacific as it forsakes a future role. An ABC that used a U-turn on shortwave as the chance to rethink its exit would look again at:

- the place of radio in the South Pacific as well as the digital future
- the central relationship with Papua New Guinea
- new resources to rejuvenate RA and place it at the centre of South Pacific media and the regional conversation

Appendix: Geoff Heriot article, 'The Crowded Pacific: time to re-consider the sharp edge of broadcasting's 'soft' power.' Published by ASPI's The Strategist, May 1, 2017.

1. Silencing Australia's shortwave voice in the South Pacific

Australia has ended a 75-year history of shortwave broadcasting to Papua New Guinea and the South Pacific.

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 Australian amnesia about its South Pacific role, responsibilities and history.

On December 6, 2016, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation announced that on January 31, 2017, it would end its shortwave transmission service in the Northern Territory and South Pacific.¹ As the ASPI Journalist Fellow, I asked the ABC: How many shortwave listeners does Radio Australia (RA) have in PNG and the South Pacific?

An ABC spokesman replied: 'While there are no firm figures on audience numbers in these regions, they are understood to be low.'

ASPI Question: What percentage of RA's users in PNG and the South Pacific get the content by shortwave?

ABC: 'This level of data is not available.'

No evidence-based policy here. Merely a comfortable ABC belief that shortwave is 'outdated technology'.

The ABC in its closure announcement ('How many listeners are affected by this decision?') expressed future confidence based on no knowledge of present usage:

*'Due to the nature of the technology and the remote locations of shortwave users, it is very difficult to ascertain with any precision the number of listeners who use the service...There is no available data on audience numbers for the regions affected by the closure of ABC International services. The ABC believes that technological advancement has improved accessibility of FM and online services and will negate the impact of no longer offering shortwave services.'*²

Stress the strangeness: Australia has no idea of the numbers in the Pacific affected when the shortwave transmitters went silent. For 75 years, a vital service; with two months notice, it's redundant. The budget figure referred to is that the ABC will save \$2.8 million annually. Some cash is pledged to build extra FM transmitters in the South Pacific. The sequence is strange: terminate shortwave immediately and dispense with those listeners - then start to look at (partial) replacements. Mind the gap!

¹ ABC Exits Shortwave Radio Transmission, December 6, 2016.
<http://about.abc.net.au/press-releases/shortwave-radio/>

² Ibid.

The ABC calls shortwave an ‘outdated technology’. That’s a developed country view. Other positive descriptors matter in the South Pacific: cheap, low tech, resilient, vital in emergencies, and still used, especially beyond the cities. Other major broadcasters are investing in a shortwave future by moving to digital shortwave. Radio New Zealand International, the BBC world Service and All India Radio among others have moved on to digital shortwave (using Digital Radio Mondiale technology) which provides FM-comparable sound quality with the reach of traditional shortwave.

The ABC’s international service acknowledges Pacific displeasure: *‘The ABC is aware some audiences in these regions have favoured shortwave services. However, the ABC believes that technological advancement has improved accessibility of FM services, in particular via mobile phone receivers negating the impact of no longer offering shortwave services.’*

The ABC statement described shortwave as a ‘legacy’. In current ABC management-speak, ‘legacy’ doesn’t denote proud history and high achievement. Instead, ‘legacy’ systems are analogue artefacts, standing in the way of the digital future. ‘Radio’ is a legacy term; the future belongs to ‘audio’. Shortwave got the legacy treatment.

The ABC will shift from Australia-based shortwave transmitters that speak to the whole of the South Pacific (bouncing signals off the ionosphere) to FM transmitters in each country, supported by mobile phone towers.

The audio quality of FM is far superior to analogue shortwave, but range is much more limited; FM is a city service, shortwave has national and international reach. The footprint of FM reception relies pretty much on line of sight and reaches a maximum around 70 kilometres. As reception can be blocked by hills, FM is not ideal for volcanic islands, mountainous areas or highlands. Plus, the Pacific knows that phone towers and FM transmitters are among the first things to go in a big blow when a cyclone hits.

In 2014, Radio Australia’s PNG Tok Pisin asked its audience how they were getting the service – 80% of the text responses were people listening on shortwave. An 80% shortwave listenership could be an underestimate because many villagers still don’t have mobile phones - no texts from them.

The ABC spokesman told ASPI that current FM transmitters in Port Moresby and Lae ‘cover a significant proportion of the country’s population’, adding:

‘The ABC is looking at three new transmitters to maximise coverage in the main population centres on PNG: Goroka and Mt Hagen in the PNG Highlands and at a strategic location on Bougainville Island. These are locations that will have no service once shortwave is switched off.’

Farewell, the Highlands. Sorry, Bougainville. That’s a lot of Papua New Guineans who had no service on January 31, 2017.

The negative regional view is expressed from Cook Islands by the media NGO, Pacific Freedom Forum, which set up a petition to the ABC to reverse the shortwave decision:

‘There seems to be no logic or connection with realities facing Pacific listeners and audiences across the region who will effectively be cut off from news, information, and life

saving information during disasters... 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.'

3

The letter to this inquiry from the Prime Minister of Vanuatu, Charlot Salwai, on this 'strange' ABC decision is an elegant expression of the case for continuing shortwave:

*'Our experience during Cyclone Pam [in 2015] is that some of the most reliable and comprehensive early warnings and post-disaster information came from Radio Australia's shortwave service. Australian shortwave assisted communities to prepare for, survive and recover from a terrible natural disaster. For us it is not outdated technology at all. It is appropriate and 'fit-for-purpose' and an important means to inform and safeguard Ni-Vanuatu people. Vanuatu values its close association with Australia at so many levels yet this strange decision by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation to end shortwave services to our region seems at odds with the recently strongly-stated goals of the Australian Government to help improve disaster preparedness and risk management in our region.'*⁴

The ABC forgets its history in the South Pacific as it forsakes a future role. One of many ironies is that the ABC Board vowed recently to give more priority to the South Pacific. The absent-minded Pacific superpower again forgets its promises.

2. Use a shortwave U-turn to re-engage with the South Pacific

Ending shortwave broadcasts to the South Pacific is a blunder, based on a shrinking, insular view of ABC responsibilities. The ABC should be embarrassed. Overturning that lousy policy call should be the moment the ABC stops its exit from the South Pacific and starts rebuilding. Changing a poor policy choice is a chance to recognise that the broad policy trend is wrong.

Over the past decade, the ABC has scaled back its role in the South Pacific, making broadcasting cuts that will:

- cost lives when disaster hits
- reduce Australia's central role in South Pacific media as a promoter of journalistic standards and open, democratic debate
- dismantle RA as an instrument of Australian assistance, influence and soft power
- weaken Australia's strategic, diplomatic and economic policies in the Islands

A rebuild will mean more communications muscle of all sorts – digital shortwave (using Digital Radio Mondiale technology) FM, and digital communications in all its cascading

³ 'Save lifesaving shortwave radio to the Pacific.' Pacific Freedom Forum.

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

⁴ Charlot Salwai, Prime Minister of the Republic of Vanuatu, Submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Restoring Shortwave Radio) Bill 2017. March 30, 2017.

http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Environment_and_Communications/Short_waveradio/Submissions

dimensions – plus lots more ABC reporting staff and much more work to re-engage with media across the Islands.

The ABC should return to the centre of the South Pacific media landscape, not shrink towards the exit. And the rebuild should have a special focus on Papua New Guinea.

The ABC killed shortwave based on a penny-pinching false dichotomy between shortwave or FM. The chant was ‘shortwave old, FM new’. The choice is dumb because it misunderstands the central role radio still plays in the South Pacific.

Only an organisation that has spent the last decade withdrawing resources from the South Pacific would have been trapped into choosing between shortwave and FM transmitters. Shortwave speaks to a whole country while FM’s more limited reach means it covers the capital or a region. Both services are essential in the South Pacific because radio is vital to the life of the Islands.

The Foreign Minister, Julie Bishop, was right to point to Pacific ‘concern’.⁵ Her ‘please explain’ to the ABC was too polite, given the damage the ABC is inflicting on Australian interests.⁶

The decision on shortwave isn’t an ABC aberration, just a further step in the Corporation’s shredding and shedding of its once important role in the life of the South Pacific. The ABC is casting off Australia’s central media role in the Islands and destroying an important instrument of Australian assistance, influence and soft power.

For the past decade, the ABC has been hacking away at its international service, Radio Australia– particularly the important role RA has as a daily journal of record for the whole South Pacific. The ABC Board must reconsider the shortwave decision; then think more broadly about it as an egregious example of the way the ABC has been cutting staff and money to junk its responsibilities in the South Pacific.

The ABC Board needs to do a U-turn on shortwave. And use that U-turn as the moment to end the ABC exit from the Pacific.

Why has the ABC been cutting lose from its historic role in the South Pacific? Partly, because the Islands and Islanders – obviously – aren’t a domestic constituency; indeed, the Senate responded because killing shortwave hurt Australians in remote parts of the continent.

There may be no big domestic constituency for good foreign policy – but the whole nation pays for bad foreign policy. That’s why phrases as varied as ‘national interest’ and ‘good international citizen’ should be more than just slogans for the Australian polity. And on this one, the ABC Board –an important part of the polity - lost sight of our interests in our region:

⁵ SBS, ‘Bishop presses ABC on Pacific “concerns” over shortwave radio cut,’ December 22, 2016.
<http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2016/12/22/bishop-presses-abc-pacific-concerns-over-shortwave-radio-cut>

⁶ SBS, ‘ABC Pacific shortwave exit a “diplomatic misstep”,’ January 31, 2017.
http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2017/01/30/abc-pacific-shortwave-exit-diplomatic-misstep-0?cx_navSource=related-side-cx#cxrecs_s

this was Team Australia going up in steam, a big hole in the whole-of-government view of the South Pacific.

Embracing the future, the ABC is busy jumping on all sorts of *platforms* to deliver content to multiple audiences (radio is old school, *audio* pumps out on everything). By all means, give the South Pacific what it needs on lots of platforms. But shortwave is still a platform that matters in the Islands (and across northern Australia) however much it might seem a *legacy* system in our cities.

The Senate action offers the ABC Board and ABC Management the chance to rethink. This isn't about ABC independence; it's about changing a bad decision. Just as you should never let a good crisis go to waste, so a policy U-turn is the moment to rethink and redo poor policy.

3. Australia's enduring South Pacific interests

Pick the anomaly in this list of what Australia does and desires in the South Pacific.

1. Australia wants a leadership role in the South Pacific, a fundamental foreign policy interest explicitly stated in 1901 in the Australian Constitution.

2. Australia's 2016 Defence White Paper gives a defence and security guarantee that stretches from Timor-Leste through Papua New Guinea to all of the South Pacific. Australia offers its strategic weight, proximity and resources to be the South Pacific's 'principal security partner'.⁷

3. Australia spent about \$3 billion to restore order and rebuild the government of Solomon Islands over 14 years.⁸

4. Australia is giving \$560 million in aid to Papua New Guinea. And Australia's total aid to Pacific Islands this year financial year is \$1.14 billion.⁹

5. An independent media is an essential element in Australia's overarching interest in South Pacific states that are free, democratic and growing. Yet, to save \$2-3 million, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in January closed down shortwave broadcasts to the South Pacific, killing off a service with a 75 year history of impartial reporting on the region.

Number 5 is the clanger. The ABC Board decision to mute Radio Australia's voice in the South Pacific harms Australian interests.

⁷ Department of Defence, '2016 Defence White Paper,' Canberra, February, 2016.
<http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper/docs/2016-defence-white-paper.pdf>

⁸ Jenny Hayward-Jones, 'Australia's Costly Investment in Solomon Islands,' *Lowy Institute for International Policy*, May, 2014.
<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/australias-costly-investment-solomon-islands-lessons-ramsi>

⁹ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 'Australia Aid Budget Summary 2016-17.' <http://dfat.gov.au/about-us/corporate/portfolio-budget-statements/Documents/2016-17-australian-aid-budget-summary.pdf>

Australia has a deeply-rooted strategic instinct in the South Pacific of denying or limiting access to the region by strategic competitors. The instinct drives a constant quest to be the top strategic partner for Island states while minimising the role of outside powers. The fact that Australia can never achieve complete strategic denial in the South Pacific means that the instinct is beset by a faint, constant ache. At various stages in the 20th century, that ache was directed at Japan, France, Germany and the Soviet Union – now it's China.

Australia's South Pacific fixations—and the strategic denial twinge—are founding elements of the Commonwealth. While the Constitution makes no mention of the post of Prime Minister or the function of Cabinet government, the South Pacific role gets an explicit tick. Section 51 is at the heart of the Constitution, defining the legal powers of the Commonwealth over such areas as trade, currency, defence and communications. Subsection 29 identifies the power over External Affairs. The next clause, Subsection 30, goes further and identifies the power over the 'relations of the Commonwealth with the islands of the Pacific.' The two clauses express an implicit division of responsibilities. The new nation born in January, 1901, was happy to hand over the operation of most External Affairs powers to London; but, from the start, Australia would take hold of its interests in the South Pacific.

The Pacific element in the Constitution reflects the way the presence of other powers in the Pacific in the 19th century galvanised the six Australian states to federate. The traditional inability of the states and the federal government to agree on much at all—still, today, a defining characteristic of the federation—makes the original act of creation even more striking. The first major convention of the states to discuss federation in 1883 was driven by the immediate need to get a common policy to oppose French and German colonisation in the Pacific. That was why New Zealand and Fiji were also at that first Sydney conference.

From 1901 to 2017, Australia's strategic instincts in the Islands have been constant. And over the past five decades Australia has expanded its defence and security guarantee to stretch from Timor Leste through Papua New Guinea to all of the states of the South Pacific.

In the 1970s, Australia's defence pledge was to Papua New Guinea. Then, by word and deed, the pledge extended to the rest of Melanesia and East Timor. Now Polynesia is covered.

Today Australia offers its strategic weight, proximity and resources to be the South Pacific's 'principal security partner'. As the 2016 Defence White Paper stated, this goes for everyone: 'Australia will continue to be the principal security partner to Papua New Guinea, Timor Leste and Pacific Island Countries.'¹⁰ The offer goes to every member of the Pacific Islands Forum.

At key moments – in Bougainville, Timor and Solomon Islands – actions have followed the words. The growth of the Australian security guarantee isn't much debated in Canberra - it's a bipartisan consensus with deep roots in history. Coalition and Labor governments proclaim the peril that would confront Australia if a hostile power got undue influence in the Islands. A constant mindset drives policy map creep. And when there have been crises in the the region the international community, as much as the Islands, expect Australia to take the lead.

¹⁰ Department of Defence, '2016 Defence White Paper,' Canberra, February, 2016.
<http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper/docs/2016-defence-white-paper.pdf>

In the 2016 Defence White Paper, Australia gives itself a broad role in the South Pacific that has both internal and external dimensions in Island states. It's a striking note in an important minor key. In Southeast Asia, Australia promises to strengthen engagement and help build regional organisation, but in the South Pacific we are going to support governments to build and strengthen security. This is extended to become a pledge to ensure government and social stability, not just freedom from military threat.

The 2016 White Paper declares it's 'crucial' that Australia help create national resilience and reduce the chances of instability. The guarantee has much more than a military flavour because the Island challenges are listed as slow economic growth, social and governance challenges, political instability, population growth, environmental degradation, natural disasters and climate change. Australia's Defence Department thinks peacetime challenges and climate change will give it a lot of work in the South Pacific.¹¹

Based on these pledges, Australia has built military and security muscle: air lift, a couple of quasi aircraft carriers, the next generation Pacific Patrol Boat, and the Army is creating marine-type qualities. Since the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands, the Australian Federal Police has built a considerable Pacific capacity; the military might even call it an expeditionary capability. For the real threats facing the Islands, the AFP can be first responders. And the cops are much cheaper.

So that's what we've promised and what we've put in place. What could possibly go wrong? Lots, if important elements of Australia's polity lose sight of Australia's Pacific interests.

The proximity and strategic import of the region demand broad policy responses from an Australia that wants to be principal security partner. In a Special Report for ASPI, Dr Joanne Wallis, shows that Australia faces 'an increasingly crowded and complex geopolitical environment in the South Pacific' that is generating shifts in the regional order:

*'Australians, and particularly the Australian Government, need to be more aware of and focused on the South Pacific. Our attention to the region has peaked at moments when the region was perceived to pose an imminent potential threat. Beyond those moments, our foreign and strategic policy in the region has been characterised by unclear, inconsistent and competing interests and intentions, which has reduced its effectiveness and undermined Australia's influence. If Australia is going to ensure that it's able to respond to the complex and crowded geopolitics of the South Pacific, it needs to prioritise the region in a clear, consistent and sustained way in its foreign and strategic policy planning.'*¹²

The Australian defence role in the Pacific is necessary but not sufficient. The threat of invasion isn't front of mind for Island governments. The constant problems - governance, population, economy, and environment – have military dimensions, but they're not military problems. Indeed, in addressing these problems accurate news and information are vital to keeping Pacific peoples informed and engaged.

¹¹ Anthony Bergin, 'DWP 2016: the ADF's peacetime roles,' *The Strategist*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, February 29, 2016. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-dwp-2016-the-adfs-peacetime-roles/>

¹² Joanne Wallis, 'Crowded and Complex: The changing geopolitics of the South Pacific,' *Australian Strategic Policy Institute Special Report*, April, 2017. <https://www.aspi.org.au/publications/crowded-and-complex-the-changing-geopolitics-of-the-south-pacific>

Australia's security pledges can't be secured only by military means. If Australia is to lead, it has to deliver economically and socially; often we don't – our leadership can lack followship in the Islands. And sometimes in fits of absentmindedness, Australia casts aside its leadership promise and an understanding of its enduring interests. The ABC has been guilty of such forgetting by leaving a growing information gap.

4. The ABC in the South Pacific: From Exit to Engagement, from Retreat to Renewal

The ABC exits the region as South Pacific need increases. The ABC forgets its history in the South Pacific as it shrinks its future role. An ABC that used a U-turn on shortwave as the chance to rethink its exit would look again at the place of radio in the South Pacific, the central relationship with Papua New Guinea, and the resources to rejuvenate RA and place it at the centre of South Pacific media and the regional conversation.

SOUTH PACIFIC RADIO:

Imagine the South Pacific not as a big ocean with specks of land – instead, see and hear a full space of overlapping radio voices with a music soundtrack. Radio is vital. Radio is a key way the Pacific talks to itself. A current example is the campaign to get MPs in Solomon Islands to donate hundreds of high quality radios (solar powered, battery or hand cranked) to their communities.¹³

* Shortwave isn't 'outdated' technology in the South Pacific – it's an essential element in the mix and will be for decades to come. The 21st century future of shortwave is the move from analogue to digital.

* Natural disasters: Shortwave isn't blown away by a cyclone as local FM transmitters can be. Shortwave saves lives.

* Shortwave resists political winds: FM relays can be closed by government directive - as Frank Bainimarama did to Radio Australia's Fiji transmitters after the 2006 coup.

* Serve rural and remote communities as well as cities: By all means broaden the reach by building FM transmitters in the South Pacific (although if FM is the future, the ABC needs to explain why it recently closed FM transmitters in Pohnpei, Palau, Kiribati and Cook Islands). FM reaches only the capital or a region, not the whole country. Australia needs to talk to everyone in the South Pacific.

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

PNG must be at the centre of Australia's South Pacific understandings. Beyond all the ties of history, this election year in PNG and the chance of a Bougainville referendum in 2019 ought to catch Australian attention.

The Bougainville referendum will ask big questions of PNG and test the stability of Bougainville. Australia needs the capability to broadcast to Bougainville. Certainly, building

¹³ See: <http://www.sibconline.com.sb/north-west-choiseul-gets-radio-boost-through-sibc/>
And <http://www.sibconline.com.sb/malaita-mp-buys-110-radios-for-constituency/>

a new FM transmitter in the regional capital, Arawa, is important. Yet the argument for an FM voice in the Arawa merely underlines the logic of Australia maintaining and strengthening the shortwave voice that can speak to the whole of Bougainville.

*The ABC should rebuild its PNG Tok Pisin service from two broadcasters towards the team of eight Tok Pisin broadcasters once fielded by RA.

*Until the ABC can get FM transmitters right across PNG, it must maintain shortwave.

The ABC should read its own reports on the problems confronting PNG's National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC): 'Citizen Access to Information in PNG' and 'Governance and the Role of Media in Papua New Guinea'.¹⁴ NBC's issues are equally important for RA. A big problem causing a notable drop in PNG radio usage is 'worsening radio signal in some provinces'. So the answer from the ABC to a deteriorating NBC signal is to turn off RA's shortwave signal to PNG. I was going to put a screamer (!) at the end of that previous sentence, but perhaps a silent sigh is enough, given silence is where the ABC is heading.

REBUILD RA AND SERVE SOUTH PACIFIC MEDIA

RA's must serve the South Pacific on every available platform from shortwave to Facebook. The rebuild needs lots of money and people - a cascading conversation involving many Pacific voices, not just a one-way Australian broadcast (the future isn't a monotone old-media monologue). The ABC should be in the centre of the South Pacific 'town square' offering broadcast conversation and digital dialogue. Since Pacific media organisations cannot afford foreign correspondents, the ABC is in a unique position to keep Pacific peoples informed about what happens in other Pacific countries that face similar challenges

* Double the RA team of Pacific broadcasters from six to 12, so the evening service isn't just a repeat of the morning program.

* Create a combined News and Digital desk with people to do everything from Shortwave to Facebook. And Facebook is going to matter as much as the hourly bulletin.

* Bring a stream of Pacific journalists to work with the ABC in Brisbane and Sydney as well as RA in Melbourne. Build a team of Pacific journalist 'stringers' (freelancers) throughout the Islands to file regularly to RA. Journalists/broadcasters in the Islands face constant controlling pressures from their governments. The ABC should be a model of how good journalism serves the South Pacific.

* The ABC should offer the South Pacific independent, reliable journalism as the basis of its role in the region. From that platform as the regional journal of record, the ABC can help build the space for broadcast conversation and digital dialogue – a cascading conversation involving many Pacific voices..

¹⁴ 'Citizen Access to Information in Papua New Guinea 2014'

http://www.abcinternationaldevelopment.net.au/sites/default/files/Citizen%20Access%20to%20Information%20in%20PNG_2014.pdf

'Governance and the Role of Media in Papua New Guinea Audience Research Brief 2014'

<http://www.abcinternationaldevelopment.net.au/activities/citizen-access-information-papua-new-guinea-2014>

PNG, was left with just two broadcasters from a previous complement of eight. News bulletins, to my ear as a traveller in the region, have lost much of their once distinctive Pacific-centric character. In vision, the ABC makes available domestic news and entertainment, packaged as *Australia Plus*, which appears to have only an insignificant profile.

There is a marked difference between the ABC providing audiences outside of Australia with access to content intended primarily for domestic consumption (a good thing, no doubt, especially for the Australian diaspora) and in applying a relevant audience focus to PNG and the Pacific. We should not confuse the matter of extended access with the purposeful use of media to engage regional audiences in pursuit of Australia's national interests.

Four reasons to re-consider the role of international broadcasting

I offer four observations about the continuing relevance of international broadcasting and related media services, which may be considered with reference to the Pacific:

1: State-funded international media are potent instruments of power projection. As the British Council¹⁶ reported in 2013, a 'great game of the airwaves' is being played out across politically contested regions of the world. The UK has since joined a number of other governments in boosting its expenditure on international broadcasting and related services. In doing so, they differentiate the purposeful use of media from many other uncoordinated or non-government manifestations of soft power.

2: In 2012, an Australia India Institute taskforce¹⁷ chaired by John McCarthy, commented on 'how instant, global television can sweep away decades of benign perceptions' of this country, and described Canberra's public diplomacy as old-fashioned and chronically under-funded. The report noted that Radio Australia's performance in the Pacific and Southeast Asia suffered from lack of investment (and that the since discontinued Australia Network English language TV service was the wrong model to be effective in the congested Indian media market).

3: Having earned the trust of audiences, a well-conceived international service maintains an influential connection with them, even during periods of political tension or crisis. A recent study¹⁸ of the BBC's Hausa and English language services again demonstrated the case. Nigerian respondents, overall, were unfavourably disposed to the West, largely as a result of US-led interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, and their perception of the West's anti-Islamic bias. Yet these same people continued to engage with the BBC, citing the accuracy and impartiality of its news, its use of personnel from the Nigerian diaspora with whom audiences shared a cultural affinity [my emphasis], and the depth of program coverage.

4: Like all news media, international services help to frame issues and assemble the picture that citizens have of one another, and of issues affecting their lives. It would be a mistake for policy-makers to view the role of such media through the limiting prism of adversarial journalism as practised in the Canberra bubble. By engaging with large audiences, internationally, these media

¹⁶ British Council 2013, *Influence and attraction; culture and the race for soft power in the twenty-first century*. <http://www.britishcouncil.org>.

¹⁷ Australia India Institute 2012, *Beyond the Lost Decade: Report on the Australia India Institute Perceptions Taskforce*.

¹⁸ Rajesh Mirchandani and Abdullahi Tasiu Akubakar 2014, *Britain's International Broadcasting*. CPD Perspectives on Public Diplomacy. Paper 1 (January).

overlap with key functions of public diplomacy such as listening to foreign publics, advocacy, cultural diplomacy and exchange.¹⁹ This need not be inconsistent with principles of editorial independence.

Returning to the crowded and complex geopolitical environment of the Pacific, the need for re-consideration goes beyond the ABC's decision to cease shortwave transmissions to under-served communities in PNG and island countries.

Resuming the long game

An evolved media model directed to PNG and the Pacific should be positioned within the totality of Australia's regional aspirations and not treated by the ABC as just another of its media properties. I note the four themes of Australia's aid program, which are intended to support: increased economic growth, more efficient regional institutions, the development of healthy and resilient communities (including disaster resilience), and the empowerment of women and girls. Cutting across all strands is the promotion of good governance across the region.

Together these suggest a mutually reinforcing dual rationale for a rigorous and entertaining service: delivering a regional good through a purposeful and culturally relevant broadcasting and digital media model; and promoting Australia's influence 'from the outside in' ... that is through the quality of audience engagement with content and discourse, and attraction to the values embedded in the service. Necessarily it would be multi-lingual, including a substantial Tok Pisin component, at least.

To be successful, in my opinion, this Pacific media service would operate as a distributed model involving contributors and media partners in PNG and island countries (dialogue, not monologue). It would maintain a close relationship with capacity building functions of the sort currently funded by Australian Aid and delivered through the ABC International Development Unit. And critically, whether operated by the ABC or another entity, this service would require a discrete management authority. Too often the ABC has struggled to synchronise this manifestation of the wider national interest with its organisational self-interest as the 'national' broadcaster.

Geoff Heriot is director of Heriot Media & Governance Pty Ltd, and a PhD candidate with the University of Tasmania. Previously, he held senior editorial and other executive roles with the ABC, including as Chief of Corporate Planning and Governance. Disclosure: he has undertaken occasional consultancy assignments under contract to ABC International Development.

¹⁹ Nicholas Cull 2009, *Public diplomacy: Lessons from the past*. CPD Perspectives on Public Diplomacy. Paper 2 (October).