

Submission to the Environment and Communications Legislation Committee with reference to the following bill

-Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Restoring Shortwave Radio) Bill 2017

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The Facts

I write this with insight from both sides of being a listener to shortwave and having worked as a broadcast technician at the Shepparton transmission site for 5+ years. I wish to address the lack of technical truth in the ABC standpoint of shortwave being an “outdated technology” and that the money will be used to invest in digital radio technologies etc.

The Shortwave services that were closed down on the 31/01/2017 were a conduit for radio communication/broadcasting using double sideband amplitude modulation, a tried and proven method of reaching target audiences. It differs from the Mediumwave services that everyone knows as “AM” on their radio from the frequencies of 530kHz-1600kHz in that the frequencies are located Higher in the radio frequency spectrum hence the name Shortwave-shorter the wave, higher the frequency. The Shortwave band on paper is 3MHz-30MHz though certain frequencies in that range are used more commonly than others, other than that the mode of transmission used by the ABC previous to the 31/01/2017 on shortwave bands was identical to that used on the “AM” radio band. If you used the “outdated technology” justification used by the ABC, that justification would have to include all radio broadcasts and bands as radio has been in use for broadcasts in Australia from the 1920's. I doubt I will live to see a time the Capital cities in all the Australian States and Territories lose their ABC AM radio services (example being 774 kHz ABC Radio National and 621 kHz ABC Local Radio Melbourne) due to “outdated technology”. The use of the “outdated technology” argument is purely a popular justification for saying we (the ABC) don't want to fund Shortwave anymore as it isn't “hip” or “trendy”. Shortwave broadcasts don't exist for that purpose, they exist for the ability to reach a wide audience over a lot of land or long distance transmission.

International Radio Australia

Systematically over the past 3-4 years there have been changes to the international shortwave broadcasts due to funding cuts to the ABC and changes in the ABC management and I'd like to bring them to light. Firstly, the programming content was changed to include mostly English language programmes only-some which weren't Radio Australia (international broadcasts) specific, using the programme feeds from ABC Triple J and ABC Radio National. There were 2 different Radio Australia specific English programmes (English Asia and English Pacific) prior to these changes and sessions during day and/or night with Tok Pisin, Chinese, French and Indonesian. Secondly, in February 2015 there was a change to nature of the transmissions, with a reduction in services from 8 down to 3 transmitters and a reduction in service availability with service failures out of hours being left off until business hours.

The international target transmission areas were mostly pacific islands where infrastructure and information availability is can be poor or non-existent. The availability of power can be erratic in these island nations and susceptible to storm/natural disasters however with a battery powered radio, transmissions are able to be heard and vital information conveyed, this is now lost to those who have little other options due to the ABC view of “outdated technology”.

Foreign affairs

The coalition has stated that funding was supported for the continuing of the Radio Australia service and that the ABC made the decision to stop Broadcasting shortwave on their own volition. I find this most interesting as this means that the public broadcaster is allowed to influence foreign affairs and relations with Pacific islands specifically as they were the major target area and also any other foreign country or interested listening party. In my view this isn't appropriate at all, it should be the decisions/influences of government and government departments, namely DFAT to decide the nature of the communications and services provided in foreign aid etc. to foreign countries.

There is an all too common view that the ABC as a public broadcaster should be allowed to be "independent" from government interference and input. This should never be the case, as the public Broadcaster is a broadcaster for the public and it is only fair and reasonable that there be cheques and balances and operations be overseen by the publically elected government that provides the ABC funding.

National effect

The three Shortwave services shut down in the Northern Territory at Catherine, Roe Creek and Tennant Creek were there to cover vast areas of the Northern Territory without access to radio via the scatter/shower type antenna and propagation. To me this makes sense although I have no experience in the Northern Territory using the service but I can say the programming content and the audience are different to the international Radio Australia service which makes the simultaneous shutdown of both services more unusual. The two things they have in common are a smaller audience than most ABC services and shortwave transmission-for the reason of vast coverage without lots of infrastructure at various locations. So the "outdated technology" justification is an easy one and hard for people to argue with, however the effect of removing a radio service to areas without other viable options seems very city centric.

Satellite radio/Internet streaming/Digital radio

All these technologies are great, they truly are but they have their limitations and this seems to be totally lost in the argument as people are often ostracised for talking about the negative/cons of new/newer technology. One major issue with the internet streaming model is the internet services aren't free, some way or another you have to pay for the internet connection, data plan on mobile phones for example. Sure it works fine in the home where you have a reliable internet connection and plan with lots of download included. Digital radio, as in DAB+ (an area that the ABC has stated they would redirect the funds to) may in fact become another AM Stereo, Betamax, HD DVD or DRM for shortwave style story that doesn't take off. Digital radio hasn't made its way out of the city areas and as I understand it has had limited take up due to quality issues (low transmission quality for multi stations in the same bandwidth) and reception limitations in moving vehicles. That's not to say it won't take off but it shouldn't be at the expense of tried and proven communication platforms and disadvantage listeners that often have limited options.

I like to point out a recent example that I experienced when on a Cruise ship in the pacific in that while they had internet availability it was sporadic and often not working due to large volumes of use on the ship. I found the only way to keep up with news and current affairs in Australia was to listen to Shortwave Radio Australia, there was a daily two page or so news print on the ship with

snippets from Australian newspapers however this wasn't free unless your accommodation was on the higher/luxury/expensive decks and was often a day or so behind the radio news.

Summary/Conclusion

From all of my experiences and understanding I still believe that Shortwave radio has its place and is needed. Shortwave radio may not be as popular as it used to be but there are still many places without reliable and cheap infrastructure to use the more modern alternatives. Shortwave radio is also a good emergency backup for when the communication networks go down due to satellite and or mobile phone service/s fail. We see this style of issue any time there is a natural disaster, be it a bush fire, flood or cyclone. Shortwave has the advantage of the transmission infrastructure being usually located in fairly stable areas and the ability to reach audiences far away in troubled areas. The Shortwave infrastructure needs to be kept intact and used as without use the infrastructure will be decommissioned and lost forever removing any options and given the current political climate and spending's unlikely to be reinstated or a reinvestment made once the infrastructure is gone.