

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

I spent my childhood in the NT, and while after that time I was away from the NT for 25 years, I have spent the last 16 years as a Darwin resident with some time out bush. Access to ABC Local Radio via the domestic shortwave service has been important to me while I am out bush and off the NT/Kimberley coast. I am making this submission from an individual perspective. I plan to spend more time in coming years in these remote areas. On a number of occasions over the last 30 years, I have also used the Radio Australia South West Pacific shortwave service while working in remote parts of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. I have also accessed both services from Timor Leste.

The ABC domestic shortwave service from three transmitters in the NT provided local radio to the NT/Kimberley and offshore, and the Radio Australia transmitter in Shepparton Vic to the South West Pacific, for those who couldn't receive FM, AM, satellite or internet services.

In early Dec, I was disappointed from a NT and international perspective to find that the ABC (without prior notice) was going to cease SW broadcasting on 31 Jan 17. <http://about.abc.net.au/press-releases/shortwave-radio/>

My disappointment was even greater when I found it was being done for such a small saving, given all the benefits for local, regional and international awareness.

On 12 Dec 16, I wrote to Mr Michael Mason ABC Director of Radio, and Ms Lynley Marshall ABC International CEO, to ask that the ABC continue the SW services for a year, to allow further consultation to determine the full impact of ceasing the services, and for effective alternatives to be introduced. Unfortunately this did not happen. However, I appreciate with this inquiry, consultation (abet late) can now occur.

Given there are two distinct radio audiences; my submission is in two sections:

1. ABC domestic shortwave service: Remote NT/Kimberley/offshore NT/K coast, and
2. Radio Australia SW Pacific: Papua New Guinea, Bougainville (PNG), Solomon Islands, New Caledonia, Vanuatu, Fiji and Samoa.

### **1. ABC domestic shortwave service**

For a small (but unspecified for the domestic service) saving, the ABC is actively deciding to remove radio coverage, and require listeners to adopt more expensive technology, which even then lacks the flexibility of shortwave (and does not work at all for a mobile user). Then, redirecting those small savings

from ceasing coverage of remote NT areas, towards DAB+ technology for Darwin and Hobart. This appears very inequitable within the NT.

<http://about.abc.net.au/press-releases/shortwave-radio/> > **How much money will the ABC save by ending shortwave services?** ‘... The closure of shortwave radio transmission services will potentially allow for \$1.9 million to be reinvested in expanded content and services. ...’

This is an important issue for the remote communities. It is difficult for people in remote communities to know what their elected representatives are doing, and what issues are important for all Territorians, if they can't even listen to the radio. With the increasing reporting in language, it is illogical to not get the news to the most remote communities/outstations and areas. If the \$1.9 million was invested in subsidising access to those affected by the changes, it might be fairer. Mr Mason stated that it had a limited audience, but he did not acknowledge it remained very important, as there is no practical alternative.

I don't question the decision to introduce new technology. However, when there are important services to already remote people at stake, the better sequence would have been to leave SW in place while introducing the new technology: if it meets expectations, it will prove so much better that people stop using SW. When the forecast outcomes are met, SW can be decommissioned. The ABC press release identified that it will be the remote areas and travellers that will lose access, and have to spend significantly (Satphones, two way SW, or VAST service) to retain access. It would have been better waiting until the technology become available to directly replace SW. SW might be 100 years old but it works, and at minimal cost.

<http://about.abc.net.au/press-releases/shortwave-radio/> > **How many users will be affected by this decision?** Expert opinion and observation estimates the number of users of the NT shortwave showers (sic assume this should be 'service') to be minimal compared to other broadcast services. The majority of the population within NT are able to receive other ABC radio transmissions on AM and FM. All ABC radio and digital radio services are also available on the VAST (Viewer Access Satellite Television) satellite service.

The ABC press release implied that this will remove radio coverage to 16% of the NT population.

<http://about.abc.net.au/press-releases/shortwave-radio/> > **Following the cessation of shortwave, what ABC services will be available to these audiences'**... The top five population centres in the Northern Territory comprise 166,626 people and are served by ABC AM and FM radio. Total population coverage for the Northern Territory is estimated at 177,224 for Local Radio, approximately 84% of the entire Northern Territory population.'

What the social and cultural impact is upon those who make up the remote 16% losing radio access is difficult to determine, as there does not appear to have been any previous situations where the ABC has intentionally removed coverage, or if so, any published research on the impact. Safety impacts might be apparent in retrospect, if warnings are not received by those in remote locations, and there were sadly adverse outcomes. The minority of the NT population that will lose access do not seem to have been consulted until this inquiry. And, even

now, the ABC has not seen fit to upload a reference to this inquiry on their website.

Given the comments in the media (conveniently I heard it on the radio, and I have NBN access), I have not been able to find evidence of regional consultation in the ABC and SBS Efficiency Study commissioned by the Department of Communications

[https://www.communications.gov.au/sites/g/files/net301/f/ABC\\_and\\_SBS\\_efficiency\\_report\\_Redacted.pdf](https://www.communications.gov.au/sites/g/files/net301/f/ABC_and_SBS_efficiency_report_Redacted.pdf) However, the study does conclude (in late 2014) at pg. 92 'An additional potential saving of up to (redacted) from discontinuing shortwave transmission of Outback Radio may be possible. However, Outback Radio particularly covers the remote areas of Australia that may be of value to those communities. The study understands that the ABC believes there is merit in maintaining this service until an alternative can be sourced.' There have been no new services introduced in the subsequent years. Satellite radio has been available for decades but this does not cover all users. However, a simple experiment of tuning in from Darwin to the Tennant Creek night frequency of 2325kHz on my son's \$20 radio showed that while not at FM quality, was quite acceptable, and incidentally the program covered important issues of closing the gap, and indigenous representation.

Recent NT reporting also reveals shorter-term concerns:

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-12-08/abc-shut-shortwave-radio-service-met-with-anger/8103096> ABC's decision to end shortwave radio service 'could be life threatening' ranger says

I had not seen any advertising about this proposal before it became a decision. In respect to the efficiency study, it would be valuable to know how many submissions were received during the consultation period? I am not sure if the NT Government or affected communities were consulted, but quite possibly not if the ABC Press Release is correct:

<http://about.abc.net.au/press-releases/shortwave-radio/> > **What consultation was undertaken by the ABC prior to closure of this service?** The ABC consulted with relevant broadcast partners including Commercial Radio Australia, governments (foreign) and Australian government (DFAT).

No one would question that the majority of people live in the cities in Australia and don't need SW, but some of those who are in remote areas, will lose access unless they pay significantly more. Even some of those in the 'majority urban areas' would probably use SW if they are travelling through remote areas if they were aware of it. It brings up the point that ABC would need to advertise the reintroduction – and actually publicise the SW service. Significant effort is given to advertising DAB. A small amount of publicity to SW may increase usage amongst some who otherwise may not have even considered it.

## 2. Radio Australia SW Pacific

Many of the villages in the Solomon Islands, Timor Leste and PNG (particularly Bougainville) are in hilly areas, which shadow FM radio transmissions. But the ABC already acknowledges that FM transmitters are not even in situ many places. At present the ABC site shows two FM transmitters each in PNG, Fiji and Vanuatu, and one in the Solomon Islands. These are all allocated to the cities. It is uncertain as to what percentage of the population of these countries are in FM coverage and thus could listen on their mobile phones as is advocated by the ABC. And, while Radio Australia is purchasing time on local transmitters, this is limited. The Radio Australia website says ABC is purchasing some time on a local transmitter; but from the SIBC website this seems to be restricted to the 30 min Pacific Beat program. The transmission schedules on the SIBC website do not seem to have been changed for years <http://www.sibconline.com.sb/>

ABC proposes that people listen to their own phone headset. The question remains who actually listens to the radio on their mobile phone? Generally people listen to news as family or even community group, and can discuss the implications. Irrespective, the mobile phone option is illogical; it ignores the fact that those with FM reception will already be listening to FM by preference using their current radios. The problem is that the people in remote areas who have SW receivers (that also receive FM) won't have received any signal after 31 Jan.

- How will coverage be achieved in the more remote SW Pacific areas e.g. Bougainville (which is approaching a unstable transition activity – and Australia has put in enormous quantities of money and DFAT and ADF Peacekeeping effort), and similarly peacekeeping in the Solomon Islands – to effectively cutting them off. In page 12 and 91 of the ABC and SBS Efficiency Study commissioned by the Department of Communications [https://www.communications.gov.au/sites/g/files/net301/f/ABC\\_and\\_SBS\\_efficiency\\_report\\_Redacted.pdf](https://www.communications.gov.au/sites/g/files/net301/f/ABC_and_SBS_efficiency_report_Redacted.pdf), states 'DFAT has advised that shortwave delivery of Radio Australia provides the only current source of the service in some sensitive areas in Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea; it supports a review of more cost effective alternatives for delivery of Radio Australia but considers that access to the service in these areas should be maintained.' While this shows that ABC did consult with DFAT as stated in the press release, it would have been more transparent to report that DFAT actually said that access to the service in these areas should be maintained.
- In May 16, Bougainville President John Momis and Papua New Guinea's Prime Minister Peter O'Neill agreed to work towards a 2019 referendum on independence <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-05-23/bougainville-referendum-set-for-2019/7436566> If this does not work, it might be up to the ADF to help restore peace again. Having a reliable news service accessible to all is very important to maintain confidence.
- The vulnerability of future local Solomon Islands FM transmitters to being switched off at will by governments – or even locally sabotaged, means that they are less likely to allow objective reporting. It is hard to imagine

foreign governments accept critical international news broadcasts from local transmitters, or even allowing SIBC to rebroadcast Pacific Beat.

- However, as details of further transmitters are unavailable (and themselves are vulnerable to national disasters), it is unclear how the ABC plans to achieve improvements.
- Fake news is becoming more pervasive – good news from the ABC is very important.

On the 8 Dec 16 Pacific Beat program was the report 'Lowy Institute says end of ABC shortwave broadcasts a tough call' a four minute podcast covering a number of key issues, but making the point 'The ABC's decision to halt shortwave broadcasts to the Pacific is likely to impact more on people living in outer islands than others in urban areas with access to the internet and mobile phones.'  
<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-12-08/lowy-institute-says-end-of-abc-shortwave/8104666>

The timing is particularly poor given it is mid cyclone season, and when the service was of direct use for communication during a disaster.

'Radio Australia bai pinisim shortwave broadcast', 7 Dec 16,  
<http://www.radioaustralia.net.au/tokpisin/2016-12-07/radio-australia-bai-pinisim-shortwave-broadcast/1638006>

'Pacific nations lose shortwave radio services that evade dictators and warn of natural disasters', Fri at 1559, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-12-09/pacific-nations-lose-shortwave-radio-services/8108032>

In early Dec 16 we had a service that has told remote Solomon Islanders that 'Australia has provided emergency supplies and a helicopter to undertake an initial assessment of affected areas to help target relief efforts' 10 Dec 16  
<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-12-10/solomon-islands-scrambles-to-reach-quake-hit-areas/8109650>

This was turned off at the end of Jan 17, with nothing yet to replace it for remote areas. The cost of replacing the SW service with enhanced FM services (noting that equivalent FM coverage is impossible) has not been publicised. I expect it to be much greater than the current SW service from the Shepparton site.

### **General points**

There are some questions of importance to both sections:

- What is the annual savings, and have these been offset against loss of reputation, and risks from accurate information not being available?
  - How much do the NT transmitters (Katherine, Tennant Creek and Roe Creek) cost annually? (this was redacted from the efficiency study)

- How much does Shepparton broadcasting Radio Australia to the SW Pacific cost annually? (may be available in the unredacted efficiency study, but would need to be separated from the previous contracted costs of transmission from offshore sites, and the now decommissioned Qld site)
- How much will it cost to decommission/decontaminate the sites?  
Decommissioning/decontaminating the Cox Peninsula site is still ongoing – will decommissioning/decontaminating the three NT ones and the Shepparton be expensive?
- Would it be more cost effective to simply keep them going?

## **Conclusion**

In summary, local and international listeners will likely have to pay more for equipment to maintain access, for what they received as a free service. Maintaining awareness will just be harder. For many international users, access will just be lost until FM transmitters are installed in foreign countries (if this ever happens). Giving less than two months notice, over a period when it is hard to develop community consultation, implies that the ABC did not care about the 16% of the NT population that will lose easy access to radio. Passing responsibility to RFDS and private SW providers to rebroadcast just weather reports is not a reasonable alternative to ABC Local Radio. Nothing of value has been provided to replace the lost access to Radio Australia.

Given the local, regional, national and international implications of this decision, I ask that ABC domestic shortwave service be restored to the remote NT/Kimberley/offshore NT/K coast, and the Radio Australia SW service restored to the Pacific.

If the decision is made to restore services, the ABC should be requested to advertise the reintroduction – and publicise the SW service on an ongoing basis. Significant effort is given to advertising DAB. A small amount of publicity to SW may increase usage amongst some who otherwise may not have even known about it. As a final point, I suggest the ABC be approached to advertise the inquiry on their site. Given this is now at the inquiry stage, the ABC should embrace a non-partisan review. Engagement would enhance the ABC reputation which has been diminished by the lack of consultation to date. This could simply be the existence of this inquiry being publicised on the ABC microsite <http://about.abc.net.au/press-releases/shortwave-radio/> There may be useful input to the ABC, and if the decision was not to recommend restoration, the transparency would go some way to restore confidence amongst remote listeners.

Richard Wiltshire