

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications

Answers to Senate Estimates Questions on Notice

Additional Estimates February 2017

Communications Portfolio

Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Question No: 113

Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Hansard Ref: Written, 10/03/2017

Topic: Shortwave radio

Senator Griff, Stirling asked:

1. Can you please provide coverage maps for the replacement service to shortwave radio – delivered on AM/FM, VAST (Viewer Access Satellite TV) and online.
2. How was information regarding the “audience impact” of abolishing shortwave radio in the NT and Pacific Islands gathered and assessed?
3. Which stakeholders were consulted ahead of the decision? Did the ABC engage with residents of remote Aboriginal communities across the Northern Territory, the top of Western Australia and Queensland? If so, how was this done?
4. The ABC states the following on its website: “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”. In a media statement, Strategic Communications Manager of ABC Radio Louise Alley said the audience estimate is “in the hundreds rather than thousands of people”.
 - (a) Did the ABC attempt to accurately ascertain affected audience numbers before taking the decision to axe the service? If not, why not?
 - (b) Given the ABC has been unable to accurately quantify affected numbers, how has the organisation determined that shortwave serves a “very limited audience” (as stated in the announcement of December 6)?
 - (c) Is the assertion that affected listeners number in the “hundreds rather than thousands” inclusive of listeners in the Asia Pacific, and of “nomadic” listeners such as truck drivers?
 - (d) How was this “hundreds” number determined? Gut feel?
5. What are the total numbers of complaints received by the ABC, to date, relating to the decision to cease the shortwave service.
6. Has the ABC consulted with DFAT before and/or following the decision to cease the shortwave service, particularly given residents of PNG, Solomons, Fiji and Vanuatu may now rely on English language broadcasts from China? If so, what was the outcome of these discussions?
7. What evidence does the ABC have that ABC international audiences enjoy sufficient access to FM and affordable online services to negate the need for the shortwave service? Please provide the evidence the ABC has relied on to come to this conclusion.

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8. In a Sydney Morning Herald article published in May 2013 ‘ABC may pull plug on China broadcast’ departing ABC international chief Lynley Marshall reportedly said “you’d have to see a significant take-up in other devices to warrant moving away from shortwave”. During Estimates, ABC Managing Director Michelle Guthrie indicated an international development team was “very connected with the circumstances in each of the countries in which we operate”.
- (a) Is the ABC – through its international development team or otherwise - aware of whether there has been a significant take-up in internet-enabled devices through the Pacific?
 - (b) What evidence does the ABC have of this? Please provide this.
 - (c) The article claimed a megabyte of data in Fiji cost about \$3 and an hour of audio streaming used about 30 megabytes. Is the ABC aware of whether data costs have significantly decreased for internet access in these regions?
 - (d) How will the ABC ensure it maintains its coverage in the region, given replacement services rely on affordable internet access?
9. The same SMH article referred to a confidential ABC research conducted in 2010 in rural PNG which found:
- 1 in 3 radio listeners tuned in to Radio Australia.
 - 8 in 10 Radio Australia listeners use short-wave.
 - 80 per cent of people had a mobile phone, but only 10 per cent of them could connect to the web.
- (a) Has the ABC conducted more recent research in this area since 2010?
 - (b) If so, what were the results?
 - (c) If not, why not – particularly ahead of the decision to axe the service?

Answer:

1. The ABC Northern Territory Local Radio AM/FM coverage map is attached. The ABC has 15 AM or FM Local Radio transmission services located across the Northern Territory, reaching 84 per cent of the population. There are no coverage maps for the VAST satellite or online streaming services as it is recognised that these services are ubiquitous and available across the continent.
2. The methodology utilised to assess the number of shortwave listeners in the Northern Territory and in the Pacific included studies of demographics, listenership and growth in audience in alternative technologies.
3. The ABC Executive undertook internal consultation with ABC technical staff, international staff and ABC Radio staff on this matter and considered their recommendations before reaching their decision.

ABC management and local staff communicated the decision to rural and regional listeners during an extended transition period, ensuring that they received support in finding alternative ways to receive ABC Northern Territory Local Radio.

As part of this transition process, ABC staff were also in contact with key stakeholder groups, including the Northern Territory 4WD clubs, the Bureau of Meteorology, the Top End Aboriginal Bush Broadcasting Association (TEABBA), the Indigenous Remote

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Communications Association (IRCA), and the Northern Territory Cattlemen's Association.

4.

- a. The ABC made its assessment of the number of shortwave listeners based on available data and industry research. This took into consideration the declining global shortwave listenership, growth in alternative technologies and the availability of those technologies in the relevant regions.
- b. The estimation of approximately 500 regular shortwave users was ascertained as part of an ABC radio listener report produced in May 2016. The ABC's assessment that there was a limited shortwave listener audience has been supported by the small number of contacts by shortwave listeners since the service ceased on 31 January 2017.
- c. The ABC's estimation of the limited number of shortwave users was based on an assessment of regular shortwave listeners in Australia.
- d. The methodology utilised to assess the number of shortwave listeners included studies of demographics, listenership and growth in audience in alternative technologies
The methodology found that:
 - The footprint of the ABC Northern Territory Local Radio shortwave services covered 74.72 per cent of its population, or approximately 156,000 people.
 - Shortwave usage in Australia is very low. In May 2000, the National Association of Shortwave Broadcasters reported that shortwave usage in Australia was less than 1 per cent of the population. This represents fewer than 1,500 active shortwave users in the Northern Territory at that time.
 - In May 2001 the BBC ceased its shortwave service to Australia. The cessation of this service concluded the transmission of any dedicated international shortwave services to Australia.
 - The significant growth in internet usage, access to streamed radio and the increasingly limited amount of content available via shortwave since 2000 has led to a sharp decline in shortwave listenership.
 - Almost a third of Northern Territory households (approximately 70,000 people) have a Viewer Access Satellite Television (VAST) receiver, which also broadcasts ABC Northern Territory Local Radio. VAST was established and funded by the Australian Government to deliver ABC Radio and TV, SBS and commercial broadcasts to remote Australia.

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5. As at 31 March 2017, the ABC has been formally contacted by 19 people in the Northern Territory and two people in the Pacific since the services were switched off on 31 January 2017.
6. The ABC has briefed the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade on its plans regarding the international shortwave services over a number of years. This included plans to cease the Asia shortwave services in early 2016 as well as the Pacific services in early 2017. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade accepted the ABC's briefing on this matter.
7. The ABC has utilised both external research and commissioned its own internal research to ascertain audience listenership trends in Papua New Guinea and the Pacific. Broadly speaking, there is consensus in this research that listeners in these countries are moving away from traditional forms of radio listening to Internet streaming and listening via mobile phones.
The research included:
 - The November 2012 Lowy Institute Analysis paper 'Digital Islands: how the Pacific's ICT Revolution is Transforming the Region'.
 - The May 2013 Citizen Access to information in Vanuatu report.
 - The September 2013 Solomon Islands Media Assistance Scheme (SOLMAS) Social Media and Mobile Qualitative Research report.
 - The 2014 Coffey report, 'Utilising Mobile Phones for Development in Papua New Guinea: Lessons Learnt and Guiding Principles'.
 - The 2014 Citizen Access to Information in Papua New Guinea report.
 - The 2015 Pacific Region Infrastructure Facility online report 'Economic and Social Impact of ICT in the Pacific'.
 - The GSMA's 'The Mobile Economy Pacific Islands 2015' report.

In particular, the 2015 Pacific Region Infrastructure Facility report found that:

- Mobile coverage across Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu has jumped from less than half of the population in 2005 to 93 per cent of the population in 2014.
- The cost of mobile calls declined by one third between 2005 and 2014.
- The percentage of cell phones in Pacific households rose from 49 per cent in 2007 to 93 per cent in 2014.
- International internet bandwidth jumped over 1500 per cent between 2007 and 2014, rising from less than 100 Megabits per second to over 1 Gigabits per second (excluding Fiji, which was already connected to a submarine cable in 2000).

The GSMA report estimated that mobile broadband connections are expected to see an almost four-fold increase by 2020 across the region, growing from 1.1 million in 2014, to 4.1 million.

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The Citizen Access to information in Papua New Guinea June 2014 report indicated a 50 per cent decline in shortwave listenership from 2012 to 2014 and that FM radio remains the dominant waveband in the PNG radio environment, with 95 per cent of all weekly radio listeners.

8.
 - a. See the ABC's response to question 7 above.
 - b. See the ABC's response to question 7 above.
 - c. The 2015 Pacific Region Infrastructure Facility identifies that due to increased mobile internet competition, the price of data in Fiji dropped by 87 per cent from 2011 to 2014 and that some data bundles offered 350 MB data bundle for FJD 1.99, or FJD 0.006 per MB, almost 900 times cheaper than in 2011.
 - d. Radio Australia coverage in the Pacific and Papua New Guinea will be available on a number of platforms, including a network of FM transmitters, satellite, through partner local radio relay stations and online streaming.
9.
 - a. Yes, see response to question 7.
 - b. See responses to questions 7 and 8.
 - c. Not applicable.

Northern Territory AM/FM Local Radio Coverage

