

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications

Answers to Senate Estimates Questions on Notice

Budget Estimates Hearings May 2014

Communications Portfolio

Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Question No: 12

Program No. Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: Australia Network

Senator Xenophon asked:

The Pacific Freedom Forum (PFF) has said that the Government cuts to the ABC in the Budget, including the termination of a contract to run the Asia Pacific television service Australia Network send a “chilling message” to the region.

The PFF says the axing of the network is evidence that the Government placed little value in a free media for people of the region.

1. How many people across how many countries currently access the Australia Network?
2. With news from public broadcasters mostly controlled or censored by Governments, what is the importance of the Australia Network and ABC news services to the region?
3. I also understand concerns have been raised about possible cuts to ABC Radio Australia’s services in the Pacific. Has the ABC consulted with Government on this?
4. The PFF has said the termination of the contract to run the Australia Network and possible ABC radio cuts could leave islands increasingly isolated and vulnerable to potential mismanagement and corruption that stems from a lack of scrutiny. Does the ABC agree with these concerns? What are other implications for the region?
5. What do cuts to the Australia Network mean for the future of the ABC’s international news service, given the ABC has in its charter an obligation to be an international broadcaster?
6. If the ABC continues its international services, what will be the flow on effect to domestic services?
7. What consultation was there with the ABC on the decision to cut the Australia Network, particularly given the ABC was only one year into a 10-year contract with DFAT to deliver the service? How many meetings were held?
8. Has there been any evidence the Australia Network was strengthening ‘soft diplomacy’ in the region?

Answer:

As at the end of May 2014:

1. The Australia Network television service has a potential reach of 144 million people across 45 countries.
2. The ABC’s international services provide a credible and trusted source of news and information to the Pacific region and one that local broadcasters in the Pacific region do not have the capacity to deliver at present. ABC programs are syndicated to many of the main public broadcasters, who rely on foreign content to help fill their schedules. Local radio networks across the Pacific region also rebroadcast ABC news bulletins throughout the day.

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3. No.
4. The ABC is not in a position to comment on the impact of Australia Network funding cuts on independent Pacific nations. However, the ABC notes that the Australia Network Service has provided important regional and international news, including strong coverage of local and regional politics in the region. Radio Australia and Australia Plus websites also provide news and information with strong coverage of Pacific affairs, regional and international news. In Papua New Guinea, the ABC is the only foreign news organisation with a resident bureau.
5. The ABC's international service will regrettably be diminished as a result of the cuts. However, within the reduced funding envelope, the ABC will provide an international media service that meets the ABC's Charter responsibilities for International Broadcasting.
6. The ABC's international services provide extended coverage of international news and events that would not otherwise be reported by a domestic-only service.
7. The ABC was not consulted on the decision to cut the Australia Network.

Over the course of the first year of the contract, ABC International met with and kept updated the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) officials and the Foreign Affairs Minister's Office on the progress of the Australia Network service.

The Chief Executive Officer of ABC International met DFAT representatives on 15 separate occasions between December 2013 and April 2014, and once with the Minister for Foreign Affairs. In addition, the CEO met senior staff from the Foreign Minister's Office on several occasions.

8. The ABC's integrated international media service was on target to reach all key performance indicators as agreed with DFAT under the delivery contract. The service was delivering more relevant content to audiences through refreshed TV and radio schedules and a suite of new digital and online services in local languages.

As a result of the changes made in agreement with DFAT, the Australia Network Service recorded a 71 per cent increase in audience reach from June 2013 to April 2014. The service attracted partnerships and coproduction deals with some of Asia's largest media organisations, doubling the potential reach for all ABC International services.

A clear example of the service's work in public diplomacy - was 'Australia month' on Indonesia's main television network, MNC in May 2014. During this month, MNC broadcast stories produced in partnership with ABC International three times per day with potential audiences of 100 million people. While the effect of this month may be difficult to quantify, it could not have been achieved without the hard work of the ABC's international team and the good will they have fostered in the region.