

Address to Australian Institute of International Affairs

Quentin Dempster*

The Glover Cottages Kent Street Sydney

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Australian insularity and the strident xenophobia it generates is, I reckon, a significant drawback to our development as a responsive and engaged country in the Asia Pacific region.

In this context it was immensely distressing to see the recent vandalising of this country's international broadcasting services through Foreign Minister Julie Bishop's unilateral decision to terminate DFAT's contract with the ABC.

While Minister Bishop can be expected to reject any suggestion that she has exercised her discretion to terminate the Australia Network contract at the insistence and persistence of a lobbying campaign by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, she has exposed the shallowness of her thinking through her stated reasons for such termination. In a speech to Chatham House in London (12th March 2014) she said:

It's not about the ABC promoting its news programmes or whatever into the region. It's actually meant to be fulfilling the Australian Government's foreign policy objectives. My question is whether or not there is an inherent conflict in having the ABC contracted to deliver Australian government messages into the region. We've had the conflict writ large when it comes to the issue of asylum seekers and the issue of the Snowden allegations. The ABC is a news organisation and perfectly entitled to report how it wishes into the region on those two contentious issues. But under a soft-power diplomacy contract, it's meant to be delivering a positive image of Australia into the region.

Obviously the Minister wanted Australia Network to be a propaganda arm of government in spite of the long standing protocol that the ABC would adhere to its editorial Code of Practice in its international reporting. DFAT had contractually agreed that it would not have veto or censorship control of material to be broadcast. Of course the ABC would expose contentious issues concerning domestic Australian politics and foreign policy and the politics and human rights abuses occurring anywhere in the region. The ABC would be bound by its editorial practices, constrained by defamation, contempt and discrimination laws domestically and by protocols covering cultural and ethnic sensitivities. The two contentious issues the Foreign Minister seemed to be referring to at Chatham House were the "burnt hands" claims of asylum seekers under Australian Navy operations and the ABC's joint reporting with Guardian Australia of the Edward Snowden drop of "five eyes" intelligence surveillance showing that the Australian Signals Directorate had tapped the mobile phones of the Indonesian president and his wife and senior Indonesian ministers and officials. For sure both were embarrassing, but journalism's role is to inform the public. In spite of Minister Bishop's claims in a recent *Insiders* interview with Barrie Cassidy that the Australia Network service was contractually under-performing, DFAT at no time raised any concerns that the ABC's operation of Australia Network was not meeting its contracted performance standards. I understand DFAT did not counsel the Minister against termination of the contract. As the department was already facing funding reductions as part of whole-of-government deficit reduction, my informants tell me DFAT seized the opportunity to claw back some revenue. In the process the national interest has been vandalised.

Let me illustrate that this description is not hyperbole.

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Radio Australia has been decimated.

GONE ARE:-

- Phil Kafcaloudes and Mornings (two hours of live programming to the Pacific weekdays)
- Asia Pacific weekdays
- Asia Review weekends
- Reduced daily news bulletins
- Loss of network entirely in western Pacific island nations including the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Marianas, Kiribas and the Cook Islands.
- RA short wave service to Myanmar (via Singapore) shut down at the end of December
- Language services cut to one person per service resulting in no continuous multi-lingual news service
- Loss of dedicated language programs to Cambodia, Laos, Burma, Myanmar, Vietnam and PNG.

Australia Network/Australia Plus

GONE ARE:-

. *No longer a 24 hour channel. Built around a six hour block of programming repeated across the day

- One hour nightly new program 'The World' reduced to 30 minutes
- Business Today weekdays with Whitney Fitzsimmons
- Pacific Sports 360 - dedicated sports review program for the Pacific
- Fashion Asia
- Around 650 rebroadcasters for the Australia Network service reduced to about 50 rebroadcasters in India, Asia and the Pacific, mostly delivered through a limited and encrypted satellite service
- Loss of untold direct-to-home viewers across Asia, particularly in Thailand, who can no longer access our signal straight off the satellite due to encryption.

Asia Pacific News Centre

GONE ARE:-

Loss of APNC correspondents in Delhi, Jakarta, Beijing, the Pacific and Parliament House, Canberra. total journalists and production staff made redundant as a direct result of the termination of the ABC/DFAT contract: 73

Foreign Correspondent

Reduced to 22 x 30 minute episodes starting in mid-April. Catalyst, the ABC's television science show will be severely cut. Catalyst will fill the 8 pm Tuesday slot for 10 weeks from February, March and early April, and then, with Foreign Correspondent finishes its run Catalyst will come back for 11 more shows. Result: Destroyed production momentum for both programs and audience confusion.

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Lateline

This program with its analysis and investigative capacity and live studio/satellite interviews with international geo-political and economic experts has been gutted. Its field reporting capacity has been stripped out. While we are expecting it to return in 2015 it will run initially on News 24. In its 25 years history Lateline has been instrumental in holding executive government to account, its investigative journalists have delivered impactful exposure of immigration blunders, indigenous and institutional child sexual abuse.

ABC's International Bureaux:

- London – a rare bright spot. The third reporter there (currently on local hire) will be upgraded to a full A-based position. And there should be more camera capacity. Currently the long time editor there also shoots PTC's (pieces to camera) and overlay. But management wants to transform that into a full camera/editor position. That may mean the current editor will be terminated and a new locally hired person brought in.
- Moscow – Bureau officially closed more than a year ago. Long time fixer/translator should have been kept on. Awaiting confirmation of this.
- Middle East – ABC has realised belatedly that having all reporting resources in Jerusalem is not wise. New Arab world office will be established in Beirut – reporter, camera and locally hired fixer/Arabic translator. The second Middle East reporter will stay in Jerusalem and become a VJ (video journalist) with one local producer to help. Expecting office administrator and driver to be sacked.
- Nairobi – Has been VJ correspondent and will remain so. Hopefully the reporter has an office, a fixer and some admin support.
- New Delhi – To become a home based VJ with local fixer/translator. The ABC has had a functioning office in Delhi for decades but now apparently the lucky correspondent is expected to cover the entirety of South Asia – India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal etc (1.2billion people) from a back bedroom.
- Bangkok – similar to Delhi. Good functioning office will be scrapped. Home based VJ plus local. Excellent camera man will be offered fewer days per year.
- Jakarta – Meant to be a bigger 'hub' with second correspondent and second camera but with regional 'fire reporter' – immediate despatch to breaking stories thought by staff to be better coordinated from Bangkok than Jakarta.
- Beijing – also slated as bigger 'hub' two correspondents and two cameras but to cover Japan and Korea and region as required. This is not really an enhancement but more a replacement of the resources which existed when Australia Network was operating.
- Tokyo – A big loser. Close down the office in the main government broadcaster NHK – where ABC currently gets access to news bulletins and feeds, although rent is 'cheap'. BBC apparently has spent 15 years trying to get back into the building. New arrangements: home based VJ plus local fixer/translator. Under Japanese law it will be very expensive to have locals including excellent local hire camera operator made redundant. The process of closing down is expected to take most of 2015. Tokyo decision is viewed by ABC staff and international correspondents as short sighted.

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- Port Moresby – Already VJ. Has separate office from home in one compound, plus local fixer. Correspondent often has to waste several days a week doing admin because ABC News will not hire someone to help.
 - Auckland – Closed and with it a lot of good South Pacific coverage as well as NZ material. ABC has had a visible TVNZ office for many years of great value to Australia's engagement with the Kiwis: a single correspondent with VJ capacity but access to professional TV NZ crews. Highly productive and comparatively inexpensive:
 - Washington – Staff do not believe claim by News managers that they are creating 'major multi-platform hubs' in London and Washington by July 2015. The truth is Washington DC is being down sized with one fewer reporter and likely to lose its long time editor (who occasionally shoots footage and interviews). One of two camera operators (an Australian on local hire conditions) has reportedly been told that his current contract is too generous and to stay he will have to take a pay cut.

In response to the Abbott Government cuts to operational base funding and the termination of the Australia Network contract the ABC Board has determined to continue international broadcasting as the Charter under the ABC Act requires it. But there can be no pretence that what we can offer through what is now being branded as Australia Plus TV is in any way effective engagement through in situ correspondents and specially designed programs for countries in the satellite footprints.

Australia Plus TV was launched immediately on the closure of Australia Network on September the 29th 2014, mainly I understand to ensure the broadcast of the AFL grand final on September 28th.

This network continues to reach audiences across India, Asia and the Pacific through its established arrangements with re-broadcasters. While the number of re-broadcasters has dropped significantly - the remaining partnerships contain all the region's largest subscription television operators in all the key Asia/Pacific territories. The actual potential reach (which is assessed through the quantum of individual rebroadcaster subscriber numbers) seems to have actually increased slightly due to a small number of new re-broadcasters coming on board late last year. Our potential reach is more than 170 million people in the region. Australia Network was under 150 million.

We have retransmission agreements with subscription TV companies in India, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Japan, South Korea, Papua New Guinea and with many of the Pacific Island nations. The main change to distribution is that we are no longer available unencrypted in Asia, which, as I indicated, means we have lost untold direct to home viewers who had their own satellite dishes and an unknown number of hotels similarly equipped.

The new schedule is based on a repeating six hour block of mixed genre programming and is heavy on rebroadcast of ABC News 24 domestic programs (Breakfast and Mornings). There is just one 30minute international news program, presented by Bev O'Connor, broadcast each evening on both Australia Plus and News 24.

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What we have lost most is the range of lifestyle, educational and news programs produced specifically for the region and, in many cases, in the languages of the regions.

The Australia Plus brand has had a longer life on digital platforms, having launched at the end of 2013. We syndicate news content to more than 30 third party sites in Indonesia and China.

Radio Australia, as I indicated, has been decimated. Shortwave into Asia has stopped completely. It now produces a two hour morning program that goes live into the Pacific weekdays (Pacific Beat) and some short news updates throughout the day. The rest of the network streams NewsRadio, LocalRadio, some tripleJ and some Radio National content. RA is still rebroadcast on a network of FM transmitters in Myanmar.

The stated objectives of ABC international broadcasting services are described as:

To share Australia stories that engage our neighbours in Asia and the Pacific and provide insights into Australia life.

To promote regional dialogue and understanding of Australia's multicultural society and Australia's role in the region.

To deliver quality, independent and pluralistic content in relevant ways on relevant platforms.

To foster partnerships that promote exchange of ideas and support business development.

With the termination of the DFAT contract we saw the demise of our 'public diplomacy' responsibilities as part of that contract. I think it is understood by the board acting to fulfil the obligations under the ABC Act that international broadcasting implies that sensibility. The ABC remains highly recognised and valued in the region for one distinctive thing - its independent news coverage. Yet Minister Bishop does not seem to recognise that value in projecting Australia throughout the region as a robust liberal democracy. The ABC will still have a place in the region but these vastly diminished services and the decimation of Radio Australia is indicating that we do not want to engage.

Sky News, the domestic subscription service on Foxtel, is now marketing Australia Channel - five channels of news, business, sport, top stories and A-PAC - public affairs. Australia Channel can be viewed on desktop tablet and mobile phone with a WiFi or internet connection - \$9.99 per month.

It's what's called OTT - Over the Top service. As a fellow journalist and content producer I wish Australia Channel every success.

But I warn there are forces at work at the ABC out to commercialise its international broadcasting services perhaps through a similar subscription model. I am opposed to this as it would be a breach of the ABC's Charter purpose. Such a user pays/subscriber model or one made dependant on advertising and advertorial type sponsorship of programs or content would only reach English speakers and expatriates in the region. The whole purpose of international broadcasting through any distribution systems is to engage with the entirety of the region's populations. To destroy short wave radio, still a valuable and universal distribution system particularly to the remotest and most impoverished islands (well out of mobile phone range) is distressing. I urged the ABC Board to re-ignite for untied funding for international broadcasting from any future government to repair the damage now being inflicted by the Abbott Government.

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The ABC is currently thinking about applying user pays charges to its successful iView replay services for domestic programming. Again I am opposed to this as it represents the thin edge of the wedge to the full commercialisation of ABC content. Taxpayers have already paid for the content the ABC produces and should not be asked to pay again. The objective of international broadcasting is one of engagement with our region, not to formulate business plans by which profit can be earned. Public service broadcasters operate on one simple principle. We treat our audiences as citizens in a democracy, not as consumers to be delivered up to advertisers. If the Abbott Government, the Liberal and National parties (or any political party for that matter), the Institute of Public Affairs (or any other so called think tank) want to abolish the ABC (and SBS) in Australia please say so.

We need a debate about the role and sustainable future of the taxpayer funded public broadcasting system in this country particularly as the digital revolution is enabling aggressive global players to have smart TV access potentially and eventually to every Australian household through WiFi video streaming. Many of these players do not pay full tax on the revenues they currently earn from Australians through download charges and/or advertising. Many use tax havens.

The ABC by survey is now the most trusted institution in Australia - up there with the Reserve Bank and the High Court. I believe it is trusted because in our now polyglot Australia people can see the ABC and its programs on occasions have the capacity to call government to account. It is this democratic check and balance, particularly in a media dominated by the dogmatic simplicities and partisan propaganda of the Murdoch Press, which justifies its continued existence.

What has just happened to our international broadcasting effort is a tragedy. There are an estimated 3.3 billion mobile phone users in the Asia Pacific. The ABC was developing a momentum to wire this country into the region as never before with targeted, quality and ethical content. That momentum has been undermined, mindlessly.

In coming months public broadcasting supporters will be calling on all political parties to renew their commitment to our unique broadcasters - the ABC and SBS - and non-commercial international broadcasting, next time preferably without a DFAT contract.

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