

# Above the noise: the importance of Australian broadcasting in the Pacific

*A submission to the Review of Australian Broadcasting Services in  
the Asia Pacific*

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## Introduction

The Development Policy Centre engages in policy debate and development issues in the Pacific region. We are making a submission to this inquiry as the quality of media access in the Pacific, including broadcast services, has substantive impacts on policy discourse, knowledge and development opportunities in the region.

This submission is based on our experience as researchers and analysts in the Pacific region, and as communications and policy professionals engaging with the media on our work.

Throughout, we draw on our centre's experience, and contributions made to our blog at [devpolicy.org](http://devpolicy.org), to make a number of recommendations to government (these recommendations are collated in the final section of this submission).

## About the Development Policy Centre and the author

The Development Policy Centre (Devpolicy) is a think tank for aid and development serving Australia, the region, and the global development community. We are based at Crawford School of Public Policy in the College of Asia and the Pacific at The Australian

National University. We undertake independent research and promote practical initiatives to improve the effectiveness of Australian aid, to support the development of Papua New Guinea (PNG) and the Pacific island region, and to contribute to better global development policy.

The Development Policy Centre runs the Devpolicy Blog ([devpolicy.org](http://devpolicy.org)), Australia's leading source of analysis on aid and development issues, with a particular focus on commentary on PNG and the Pacific.

Ashlee Betteridge is the Centre Manager at the Development Policy Centre. She leads on the centre's media engagement and public outreach activities. Previously she worked as a journalist in Australia for News Ltd in Sydney and the Jakarta Globe in Indonesia, and in communications roles for Plan Timor-Leste and the Center for International Forestry Research. She holds a BA Communications (Journalism) from the University of Technology, Sydney, and a Master of Public Policy (Development Policy) from Crawford School of Public Policy, The Australian National University.

## **Attachments**

Please find attached to this submission a number of recent posts from the Devpolicy Blog ([devpolicy.org](http://devpolicy.org)) on the issues being discussed by the committee, which are referred to in the analysis below.

1. Blog by John Greenshields, a retired Adelaide architect who has worked extensively in Papua New Guinea, titled "Why Australia must restore shortwave radio to the Pacific".
2. Summary blog of a submission to a recent parliamentary inquiry on public interest journalism by Ashlee Betteridge, titled "Public interest journalism and regional interests: implications for the Pacific and Australian aid".
3. Blog by Matthew Dornan titled "Australia's relationships with its Pacific Island neighbours should not be about China", which discusses the role of the media in Pacific-Australia relations.
4. Blog by Jemima Garrett, former ABC Pacific correspondent, titled "The time is right for a 'step-up' in ABC broadcasting to the Pacific".

## Current issues in Pacific media access

While this inquiry focuses on Australia's provision of broadcast services into the region, an understanding of the current constraints in Pacific media markets is key to understanding Australia's important role as a content provider and broadcaster, particularly of journalistic content.

Media capacity and the quality of journalism in the Pacific and PNG is still low, with the media only comprising a small number of outlets in most countries. This is compounded by low levels of press freedom in some countries, such as Fiji. There are also few independent watchdogs or ombudsmen; cultural and political pressures which can make it difficult for journalists to do their jobs; low advertising revenue for local outlets to fund quality journalism; and limited training or professional development opportunities for reporters (see the [PACMAS 2013 State of Media and Communications](#) report for further details on constraints on local reporting capacity in the Pacific).

There are two main international players in broadcasting and journalistic coverage of Pacific issues. Those are the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), the main subject of this inquiry, and Radio New Zealand International (RNZI). For those who regularly consume Pacific-related media, it is generally agreed that RNZI has taken ABC's mantle as the premier provider of Pacific-related content. Repeated cuts to the ABC's Asia-Pacific news coverage has damaged its ability to cover the region as comprehensively as it has in the past.

The decision to end shortwave radio broadcasts into the region has also reduced access. Due to the challenging geographic terrain of the Pacific, many areas which had access to Australian radio broadcasts via shortwave are no longer able to tune in. This has impacted on access to news and information in some communities, as Pacific-based broadcasters are also limited in their ability to reach such audiences.

In a [Devpolicy Blog post](#) in September 2017, John Greenslades, a retired Adelaide architect, wrote of the impact of the shortwave cut in many of the remote islands of PNG that he visited during 2017:

“The island of Panaeati, south of Misima, is typical of many we visited. It has a population of 2,080 people, many well educated, and fluent in English. The missions and the former Australian administration are responsible for this. Our contacts there expressed great disappointment at the loss of Radio Australia services in January 2017. So much so, that they discussed the prospect of raising a petition at local government level to the Australian government.

There is a patchy and expensive mobile phone service in Milne Bay, and it gets worse as you move to the islands where it becomes non-existent in places. There is no internet or AM/FM radio service for most of these islands. They have no other alternatives for news. We brought the PNG election results to one island 10 days after urban voters knew.

The argument that alternatives are or will become available is not acceptable... These people are well disposed towards Australia, and we have abandoned them.”

As highlighted above, although mobile phone use and social media use in the Pacific is increasing, there are still large sections of the population without access to these services. A [2015 report by GSMA Intelligence](#) showed that in the Pacific islands, mobile subscription penetration was at 37% at end 2014, and was predicted to reach 42% by 2020. Mobile broadband access was only at 17% of population in 2014. There is a tendency to group Southeast Asia together with the Pacific region in the bundle of “Asia-Pacific”, but digital access, communications needs and technology are at very different stages in most parts of the Pacific when compared to Southeast Asian nations, with much higher levels of mobile and internet accessibility in Asia. While digital access solutions and a greater focus on online and mobile may be appropriate for broadcast targeting Asian countries, in the Pacific there is still a significant risk of audience exclusion by pursuing these technologies in isolation from more traditional broadcast methods.

*Recommendation 1: The government and ABC management reconsider the decision to end shortwave radio broadcasts into the Pacific region, for reasons of access and inclusion.*

## Impacts of cuts on the quality of journalism in and on the Pacific

As a centre with research work focused on Papua New Guinea and the Pacific, the steady decline in quality Australian coverage of the region is an acute concern. The decision to end shortwave radio broadcasts to the Pacific has come at a time when journalism covering the region has faced other substantive setbacks. The end of shortwave broadcasts also formed part of a larger package of cuts, which has significantly dented the ABC's ability to cover Pacific news and issues. It is impossible to decouple the shortwave decision from the wider impacts on broadcast journalism, and journalism at large.

Some examples of other pressures include:

- The shedding of 80 jobs from the ABC's Asia Pacific News Room and ABC International in July 2014. 31 positions were lost at Radio Australia, including foreign correspondent roles, such as that of veteran Pacific correspondent Sean Dorney, who had reported in the region for 40 years.
- The axing of the Australia Network in 2014.
- The closure of the Australian Associated Press bureau in Port Moresby in November 2013.
- The closure of The Global Mail, one of few platforms for long-form reporting on the region, in 2014.
- Over the past five years, the loss of several journalists who had a particular interest in Pacific reporting, either through retirement, retrenchment or their own decision to leave journalism. Examples include: Catherine McGrath (SBS), Sean Dorney (ABC), Greg Earl (AFR), Daniel Flitton (Fairfax) and Bruce Hill (ABC). Others, such as Jo Chandler (formerly of Fairfax and The Global Mail) and Jemima Garrett (formerly of the ABC), are now working freelance and despite their deep interest in and knowledge of the region, they have expressed to us the challenges they face in placing and pitching stories on the Pacific.

Each of these developments, along with the capacity constraints in Pacific media described above, has combined to reduce the quality and quantity of reporting on the

Pacific region that we see here in Australia, and to reduce the access that Pacific islanders have to high-standard news about their region.

There are a number of reasons why this is problematic.

The Pacific region is home to our nearest neighbours, and Australia is home to a substantive Pacific diaspora. Papua New Guinea, the largest country in the region, was even an Australian colony. Yet the average Australian knows very little about this part of the world. International and Australian coverage of this region has always been low, but the recent cuts to Pacific reportage threaten to decrease knowledge and understanding of this important region among the Australian public even further. Even though this inquiry is focusing on broadcasts into the Pacific region, the wider cuts have impacted resourcing of Pacific coverage, which has had ramifications for the domestic Australian media market as well.

Australia is not just a neighbour to the Pacific — we are an actor in the region, whether it is through our trade relationships, involvement in regional bodies and negotiations, the close to \$1 billion we send to the region annually as foreign aid, or through other policy decisions: the offshore processing of asylum seekers on Manus and Nauru being the most current and significant. Transparency and scrutiny of Australia's activities and involvement in the region is crucial, for Pacific publics as well as the Australian public. This requires journalists to be actively working in and on the region, and to have a strong understanding of it.

As discussed above, there are many constraints on press freedom and quality issues plaguing media coverage in the Pacific. Australian (and New Zealand) coverage of the Pacific has provided important external scrutiny of political and social developments in the region for decades, at times opening up opportunities for Pacific journalists to pursue critical issues that may not have otherwise come to light.

On top of the decline in Pacific reportage, quality issues pervade the minimal Australian mainstream coverage. In a [June 2018 blog post on devpolicy.org](#), Development Policy Centre Deputy Director Dr Matthew Dornan highlighted the impact that poor Australian coverage of China's Pacific presence was having on broader relationships.

“This year has seen intense media scrutiny of Chinese aid to our Pacific Island neighbours. The focus of such coverage has been squarely on Chinese ‘threats’, be they debt-related or military in nature. Some of the coverage has bordered on the hysterical.

For a region accustomed to being ignored by the Australian press, it is a big change to the status quo, though not necessarily a positive one. For every story in which the Australia press has chosen to focus on non-issues, there has been a failure to report on subjects that actually matter and affect our relationships with Pacific Island states — the response to climate change being a case in point. More than that, our relationships with the Pacific, whose leaders and citizens have always been sensitive to condescending remarks from the region’s big brother, have suffered every time Pacific Island states are talked about as if they are unable to manage their own affairs.”

While there is likely no simple fix to this lack of quality regional coverage in the wider mainstream media market, which is facing challenges of profitability and competition in the online era that are in many ways beyond the scope of government intervention, there is a clear impact on informed Pacific coverage from the repeated government cuts to public broadcasters, which have always been among the most dedicated to covering regional issues. Programs such as ABC’s Pacific Beat, for example, give voice to a range of Pacific actors, with varying perspectives. Pacific Beat’s staffing and airtime have both been reduced under the repeated cuts and changes that have taken place in the ABC’s Asia Pacific News Centre.

Better resourcing of public broadcasters for quality international journalism can help stop this decline in Pacific reporting, and turn the tide on Australians’ decreasing knowledge and understanding of some of their nearest neighbours. Stopping the erosion of public broadcast journalism on the Pacific also has benefits for Pacific islanders. Part of the problem of the end of shortwave broadcasts, beyond the accessibility issues already described, is that it has been seen as a cost saving measure by an increasingly stretched public broadcaster, instead of an opportunity to reinvest or innovate in strengthening coverage of the Pacific. Pacific broadcasting cuts shouldn’t be

viewed as an opportunity to spend less and do less, but as a loss to shared understanding and knowledge.

*Recommendation 2: In making decisions about funding allocations and expenditure, that both the government and management of Australian public broadcasters consider:*

- a) the importance of supporting public broadcasters (ABC and SBS) to have foreign correspondents based in the Pacific region;*
- b) the important contribution that quality Australian journalism on the Pacific region makes to Australian perceptions of the Pacific, and to development, governance and accountability in the Pacific region itself;*
- c) the urgent need to increase resourcing for this work.*

## **The importance of media access in achieving development and economic outcomes**

Diverse and strong medias, which support and active and informed public sphere, are widely considered to be important contributors to national development, with the ability to influence governance, democracy and drive behavior change. Many development agencies globally utilize media for development initiatives in a wide range of areas, including anticorruption, gender equality, education and disaster preparedness. In the Pacific this is no exception, and the Australian Government itself supports several media development initiatives through Australian aid, such as the Pacific Media Assistance Scheme (PACMAS). Other development organisations such as UNDP and UNESCO are also engaged in this space in the Pacific.

Yet leading by example through the broadcast of quality Australian reportage into the region could be the most important investment of all.

As commentary around the cuts to Radio Australia from [Nic Maclellan](#), [Sean Dorney](#) and others highlighted, broadcasts into the region provide Pacific islanders with a view of the wider world and region that is often not covered by local media, and disseminate vitally important information, particularly during natural disasters, political upheavals

or other emergencies. It is worth noting that strengthening disaster responses in the Pacific is an ambition under both the Foreign Policy White Paper, and Australia's strategic framework for the aid program.

Australia's Foreign Minister Julie Bishop has particularly emphasised the need for Pacific economic development — but investors and businesses need access to timely and accurate information about political, trade and other news developments. The decline of Pacific coverage and broadcast access is not coherent with economic development objectives.

An anemic public broadcaster and an anemic aid budget combined, working in the media for development space which often falls lower down the list of aid funding priorities and attracts only modest financial support, will not be able to overcome communications infrastructure issues, nor innovate to produce quality content that promotes development in the region. On several fronts, the neglect of broadcast media and Pacific coverage is counter to the wider development objectives that Australia and other aid donors are pursuing in the region, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

## **The importance of media access for the Australia-Pacific relationship**

Beyond Australia's goals to promote economic development, democracy and social development in the Pacific islands region, there is also the broader strategic imperative of building and maintaining strong country-to-country relationships, and retaining Australia's place as a key regional actor.

The landscape in the Pacific is changing with the growing participation of China, which John Greenslades highlighted in his blog post, emphasizing the importance of Radio Australia broadcasts as a form of soft power:

“As Australia increasingly leaves a cultural void in Pacific, it is being quietly replaced by other countries whose interests may not be in PNG's best interest. A Radio Australia shortwave service is an inexpensive way for our country to

extend soft power, give reassurance and keep true friends. Australia can do something simple that will return much more than the effort required.”

Matthew Dornan also emphasized the reputational risk of poor understanding and poor media coverage of current debates on China’s presence in the Pacific:

“References to ‘our patch’, the focus on Australia’s security to the exclusion of all else, the condescending coverage of Pacific Island governments and leaders — all of these confirm the worst of how Australia and Australians are viewed by the Pacific. All serve to undermine our relationships with the region.”

These are the spaces where quality broadcast journalism and content have the potential to create change and enhance understanding. The history of broadcasting as a form of soft power runs back to the 1920s, and while the emergence of digital diplomacy and new modes of communication have created new opportunities, they have not made broadcast a redundant tool, particularly when considering the unique characteristics of the Pacific.

The government’s 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper makes strong claims on Australia’s ambition to step up relations in the Pacific region.

*“Australia will engage with the Pacific with greater intensity and ambition, deliver more integrated and innovative policy and make further, substantial long-term investments in the region’s development.”*

Stepping away from the provision of broadcast services such as shortwave into the Pacific region, and decimating the capacity for Pacific reportage among Australia’s public broadcasters, appears to be the opposite of intensity and ambition, and a step away from an integrated policy approach to the Pacific.

The White Paper also notes the potential of collaboration.

“Australia and the Pacific can also share institutions and systems to help bring efficiencies and economies of scale.”

Broadcast services were one area where this was occurring, as content produced by an Australian news organisation and broadcast into the region had the double benefit of

informing and educating both domestic and regional audiences. It seems remiss that this sharing of broadcast and journalistic capacity has been diluted rather than further pursued.

*Recommendation 3: That the government consider the need for policy coherence between its development and foreign policy aims in the Pacific region, and its provision/support for broadcast services in the region.*

## **Conclusion**

The question of whether or not Australia should broadcast shortwave radio into the Pacific is not difficult one. If Australia wants to provide true access to quality news broadcasts and emergency information, shortwave is the only technology currently able to deliver this in a region with poor ICT infrastructure, low access to mobile and internet, and sweeping, challenging geography.

But it is also not a question that can be untangled from other issues around public interest journalism on the Pacific region, and our broader policy objectives in the region.

The provision of broadcast services into the Pacific region is not simply one of service delivery. It serves a strong national interest imperative, brings benefits for economic and social development imperatives, and supports informed policy and political debates.

Its neglect is counter to Australia's stated foreign policy objectives in the Pacific region, and is a missed opportunity that will surely be capitalized upon by other actors.

## Summary of recommendations

*Recommendation 1: The government and ABC management reconsider the decision to end shortwave radio broadcasts into the Pacific region, for reasons of access and inclusion.*

*Recommendation 2: In making decisions about funding allocations and expenditure, that both the government and management of Australian public broadcasters consider:*

- d) the importance of supporting public broadcasters (ABC and SBS) to have foreign correspondents based in the Pacific region;*
- e) the important contribution that quality Australian journalism on the Pacific region makes to Australian perceptions of the Pacific, and to development, governance and accountability in the Pacific region itself;*
- f) the urgent need to increase resourcing for this work.*

*Recommendation 3: That the government consider the need for policy coherence between its development and foreign policy aims in the Pacific region, and its provision/support for broadcast services in the region.*

## Attachment 1



# Why Australia must restore shortwave radio to the Pacific

By John Greenshields

On our Australian doorstep is an amazing place, Papua New Guinea. Seven of us were there for the month of August, exploring a remote region of islands and atolls in the Massim district of Milne Bay Province by boat, visiting places most people would not think of seeing.

The incredible opportunity we experienced was matched with a grateful

appreciation and response from the communities we meet at each of the 30 islands we stopped at. There was mutual respect. We weren't there just as tourists, we were interested in their culture and in particular their many different, traditional types of single outrigger canoe. They responded with information, introduced elders who talked of the past, let us look over the craft in detail and even took us sailing.



*Harry Beran discussing traditional canoes at Wabanum village, MUYUW (Woodlark) Island*

As Australians we were warmly received everywhere. Australia was the PNG administrator for decades and has left many good things in place. The Australian influence was there in diverse ways, including an inspired wooden Hills Hoist and outdoor bench setting at Boagis village, way out at the extreme end of PNG

territory.



*A Hills Hoist copy at Boagis village, Muyuw (Woodlark) Island*

But there was a worrying side that we shared. We visited many remote islands where basic services are deplorable, particularly their health services. At one sub-provincial health centre in Guasopa village [Woodlark Island], they had nothing but Panadol. We shared our first aid resources and knowledge, and treated those we could with spare drugs we had brought from Australia. There are so many issues facing PNG that we despaired at its future prospects.

Australia is the lucky country, but right now New Guinea is not. We were most surprised and quite angry to learn that Radio Australia no longer transmits to the region, or even the wider Pacific. One small service that Australia could offer is the return of shortwave radio.

The island of Panaeati, south of Misima, is typical of many we visited. It has a population of 2,080 people, many well educated, and fluent in English. The missions and the former Australian administration are responsible for this. Our contacts there expressed great disappointment at the loss of Radio Australia services in January 2017. So much so, that they discussed the prospect of raising a petition at local government level to the Australian government.

There is a patchy and expensive mobile phone service in Milne Bay, and it gets worse as you move to the islands where it becomes non-existent in places. There is no internet or AM/FM radio service for most of these islands. They have no other alternatives for news. We brought the PNG election results to one island 10 days after urban voters knew.

The argument that alternatives are or will become available is not acceptable. That is patently untrue of the 30 islands we visited. These people are well disposed towards Australia, and we have abandoned them. They have a great need for news, comment, and sport, with rugby union, league, cricket and Australian Rules being of particular interest.

An English language news service would also assist retention of English as their communication medium with the outside world.

As Australia increasingly leaves a cultural void in Pacific, it is being quietly replaced by other countries whose interests may not be in PNG's best interest. A Radio Australia shortwave service is an inexpensive way for our country to extend soft power, give reassurance and keep true friends. Australia can do something simple that will return much more than the effort required.

Late last week, the Nick Xenophon Team [announced](#) that it had negotiated "a review of the reach of Australian broadcasting services in the Asia Pacific region, including examining whether shortwave radio technology should be used" to be included as part of the Government's [media reform bill](#). This is a positive step, but far from settles the matter. Therefore, any advice on how our group can continue

to advocate on this issue would be most welcome. Please leave a comment on this post to contact me if you would like to discuss.

*John Greenshields is a retired Adelaide architect who lived in Papua New Guinea and worked on their Government infrastructure projects for 11 years between 1967 and 1982. He has returned often and recently travelled to PNG to record the art and traditional canoe-making practices of the Milne Bay Province.*

Link:

<http://www.devpolicy.org/australia-must-restore-shortwave-radio-pacific-2017091>

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Date downloaded: August 1, 2018

Attachment 2



# Public interest journalism and regional interests: implications for the Pacific and Australian aid

By Ashlee Betteridge

The Senate Select Committee on the Future of Public Interest Journalism is [currently inquiring](#) into 'the state of journalism in Australia and around the

world', which seems like a rather wide mandate.

But it's no secret that journalism has struggled with the rapid changes brought forth by the online era, such as the fairly recent advent of 'fake news', so it's worth investigating if anything can be done to stop the spiral.

At Devpolicy we have seen the impact of media decline through our work in several ways, the most jarring being the cuts to Australian public broadcasting on and in the Pacific. But there have been other, more subtle changes too, along with the efforts we ourselves have made to try to get more eyeballs on issues we believe are important.

So our centre decided to make a submission to this inquiry. You can read our full submission [here](#), but we summarise the key arguments below.

### **Public interest journalism and the Pacific region**

As a centre with research work focused on Papua New Guinea and the Pacific, the steady decline in quality Australian coverage of the region is an acute concern.

In recent years, there have been a number of worrying developments, like the [shedding of jobs](#) from Radio Australia, the [axing](#) of the Australia Network, foreign bureaus [closing](#) and the end of [shortwave radio broadcasts](#) into the Pacific earlier this year.

Combined, these developments have served to reduce the quality and quantity of reporting on the Pacific region that we see here in Australia, and to reduce the access that Pacific islanders have to high quality news about their region.

There are a number of reasons why this is problematic, like the fact that Australians know so little about our nearest neighbours. Or Australia's own role as an actor in the region, whose actions should be accountable and transparent

(let's be real, sometimes we have been pretty dodgy). The important role that broadcasting plays in opening up the wider world to those living in the Pacific and in providing information during upheaval or emergency. The challenges to capacity still facing journalism in the Pacific region. And just the sheer lack of policy coherence in having a Foreign Minister who is passionate about the Pacific and wants to encourage economic development there at the same time as access to quality and timely information on the region is being reduced.

While there is likely no simple fix to the lack of Pacific coverage in the wider mainstream media market, which is facing challenges of profitability and competition in the online era that are perhaps beyond the scope of government intervention, there is a clear impact on Pacific coverage from the repeated government cuts to public broadcasters, which have always been among the most dedicated to covering regional issues.

This is something that the government can take carriage of. Better resourcing of public broadcasters for quality international journalism can help stop this decline in Pacific reporting. It's also crucial that access to this reporting is maintained through appropriate broadcast services.

(For more on Pacific coverage, also see Devpolicy Associate Tess Newton Cain's [submission](#) to the inquiry here.)

### **Public interest journalism and Australian aid policy**

The current challenges facing the media industry have revealed themselves particularly sharply in our efforts to inform conversations on Australian aid.

It has been clear to us that, beyond the work of a handful of journalists with an interest in foreign aid and development, massive changes such as the [repeated aid cuts](#) and the [integration of AusAID into DFAT](#) have passed with little attention, despite efforts from ourselves and the aid and development sector at large to

draw attention to them.

This lack of attention from the media, which is often interpreted by media-clip-dependent policymakers as a lack of interest or support for aid from the public itself, has had dire consequences for Australia's contributions to international development efforts — it has been interpreted as a sign of support (or at least ambivalence) on the 33% cumulative cut from the aid budget since 2014-15.

In our own experience, and from what we have heard from journalists who come to our centre for assistance or inquiries when trying to pursue stories on Australian aid, one barrier to their coverage (beyond disinterest from editors) is access to information.

Since the integration of AusAID into DFAT in 2014, the volume of public communication and media engagement efforts on Australia's aid and development initiatives has declined (see the policy brief [Communication post-integration: reloading Australia's efforts](#)). This means that even good news stories about aid initiatives are not being circulated or promoted.

For those looking to dig, or to perhaps even access basic information about what aid is being spent on, our centre's second [transparency audit](#), released in December 2016, showed significant decreases in project-level information on the DFAT website when compared to 2013.

Government cannot force the media to cover aid policy, or any policy area, no matter how important. But the government can support public interest reporting on policy by improving the transparency of its departments and the availability of documents and data, and by bolstering departmental efforts to clearly and openly communicate the work that they do.

## **Our efforts to fill the coverage void**

As an organisation looking to create positive influence through evidence and research, the increasing difficulty we have faced in focusing media coverage on issues of national and regional importance has led us to start a number of platforms to try to make it easier for the media to cover our field, and for our key audiences to access the analysis and information they need.

You are reading one of them now — the [Devpolicy Blog](#). We also have our [Aid Profiles](#) series, which aims to bring untold stories of Australian contributions to aid and development to light. And then we have the [Australian Aid Tracker](#), which is meant to help people understand aid without getting freaked out by impenetrable documents (we also just got a bit tired of seeing news stories where basic facts were wrong).

In addition to our own initiatives, we also support the work of other university-centered platforms with similar aims, such as [The Conversation](#), [Policy Forum](#), [East Asia Forum](#) and [New Mandala](#).

Such platforms are no replacement for high-quality investigative journalism — while the research they disseminate may at times lead to breaking discoveries, they suffer from similar resource, staffing and time constraints to those that have been affecting mainstream journalism, as well as the simple fact that most of the contributors on these sites are not journalists.

However, these sites do provide an important role in disseminating research findings and evidence, fostering policy debate on areas that would otherwise be overlooked, and correcting misinformation in the public sphere, which are all activities that are significantly in the public interest.

Like public broadcasting, these types of outreach and engagement activities from academic institutions should be seen as a public good that plays an important role in supplementing the investigative efforts of journalists, and supported.

## Wrapping up

There is no doubt that the media landscape in Australia has undergone rapid change in recent years, unfortunately to the detriment of high-quality public interest reporting —despite the fervent efforts of individual reporters and some organisations to maintain such standards.

Government may not be able to tackle many of the complex changes to media markets that have occurred in recent years. But government can ensure that public broadcasters are properly funded to achieve their mandate of reporting in the public interest, that government agencies and departments do not close their doors on the media (whether new or old) when it comes to informing policy discourse and debate, and that other organisations that provide the knowledge base that supports public interest journalism are not starved of resources.

*Ashlee Betteridge is the Program Manager (Research Communications and Outreach) at the Development Policy Centre.*

Link:

<http://www.devpolicy.org/public-interest-journalism-regional-interests-implications-pacific-australian-aid-20170714/>

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## Attachment 3



# Australia's relationships with its Pacific Island neighbours should not be about China

By Matthew Dornan

This year has seen intense media scrutiny of Chinese aid to our Pacific Island neighbours. The focus of such coverage has been squarely on Chinese 'threats', be they debt-related or military in nature. Some of the coverage has bordered on the hysterical.

For a region accustomed to being ignored by the Australian press, it is a big

change to the status quo, though not necessarily a positive one. For every story in which the Australia press has chosen to focus on non-issues, there has been a failure to report on subjects that actually matter and affect our relationships with Pacific Island states — the response to climate change being a case in point. More than that, our relationships with the Pacific, whose leaders and citizens have always been sensitive to condescending remarks from the region's big brother, have suffered every time Pacific Island states are talked about as if they are unable to manage their own affairs.

Coverage of the construction of the China-funded Luganville wharf in Vanuatu has been especially egregious. Claims by Fairfax that the Vanuatu government was in [preliminary discussions](#) with China about “a military build-up” - claims that were unsubstantiated, and swiftly denied by the Vanuatu government - have been accompanied by a series of articles that expressed alarm about Chinese aid to Vanuatu (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). A key focus has been the construction of the Luganville wharf, which having been built to dock cruise ships which frequent Vanuatu's waters, can also dock naval vessels (as recently occurred when the Australian navy offloaded aid supplies in response to a volcanic eruption in Ambae, Vanuatu).

Never mind that the Vanuatu government has clearly stated the wharf has no military purpose and that Vanuatu intends to continue its long history of non-alignment. Never mind the fact that an exasperated Vanuatu government [publicly released](#) the contract for the wharf in order to show there was no debt equity swap clause that could force it to give up the wharf in the event of a default on the loan (thus showing the media's [comparisons](#) with Sri Lanka to be unfounded). Australian media coverage of the non-story has continued unabated.

Enter 60 Minutes the week before last with a [story](#) about “The sneaky tactics behind the rising global power's latest master plan.” In what can only be described as a mediocre report, made over a month after other media sources had

already reported on the wharf, 60 Minutes [again](#) makes the discredited claim that Vanuatu could be required to cede control of the wharf should it default on its debt. A claim already discredited by evidence from the Vanuatu government. A claim based on the idea that Vanuatu faces a debt crisis, which the [International Monetary Fund](#) has said it does not. Somebody call Media Watch please.

Coverage of Chinese activities in the Pacific has also led to changes in the way the press reports on Australian aid to the region. The aid budget, which this year suffered its [fifth cut in a row](#) under the Coalition, nevertheless saw a small increase in funding for the Pacific. Most major news outlets ran stories linking this increase to geopolitical competition with China. The Australian, which has provided longstanding criticism of Australia's "wasteful" foreign aid, suddenly featured [articles that were critical of the cuts](#) on the grounds that declining aid has opened the door to Chinese aid funding in the region.

For someone who believes that aid, for all its faults, can be of real benefit to poor people, this shift in the stance of the conservative press has been somewhat welcome. It has no doubt broadened opposition to cutting the foreign aid budget any further, even if it is hard to argue the case for more aid in a region that already receives very high levels of development assistance (though supplementing grant-based Australian aid with a [development finance facility](#), as argued by Bob McMullan, is an idea with merit).

At the same time, this focus on Chinese aid to the region has been damaging to how Australia is seen by the Pacific. References to 'our patch', the focus on Australia's security to the exclusion of all else, the condescending coverage of Pacific Island governments and leaders — all of these confirm the worst of how Australia and Australians are viewed by the Pacific. All serve to undermine our relationships with the region.

What could Australia do differently? Better reporting would be a good start, and would be helped by a greater media presence in the region. The decline of

Australia's media presence in the Pacific is [well-documented](#). Australian reporting on the Luganville wharf has either been done remotely or has relied on fly-in fly-out visits to Vanuatu. The quality of reporting has no doubt suffered as a result (interestingly, a review of Australian media services in the Asia-Pacific has recently been announced — submissions can be made [here](#)).

An improved understanding of the region among Australians would also help. Papua New Guinea is Australia's closest neighbour, sitting just five kilometres from Boigu island in the Torres Strait. Yet the average Australian knows next to nothing about our northern neighbour. Our education system is partly to blame. With the exception of Kokoda, Australians are far more likely to be taught in school about European history than about that of our immediate neighbours. At the tertiary level, units of study focused on the Pacific are few and far between (ANU is the only tertiary institution in Australia to teach Pacific Studies, a point of contrast with the situation in New Zealand). This needs to change.

Inevitably, and as noted by the [Foreign Policy White Paper](#), stronger relationships with the region must be built on people-to-people links. This is where migration policy is important. Australia's emphasis on skilled migration, coupled with stringent visa requirements for Pacific Islanders, has historically kept Pacific Islanders, and Melanesians in particular, out of Australia. In the [2016 Census](#), just 23,000 residents claimed Melanesian ancestry - a remarkably small number, given that PNG (population about 8 million) is a former colony and on Australia's doorstep. Contrast this situation with New Zealand, which has a large Pacific population, owing at least in part to special migration pathways that are available to Pacific Islanders, such as the Samoa Quota and the Pacific Access Category.

If Australia is serious about its engagement in the region, it needs to consider what more can be done to build people-to-people links and increase Australian's understanding of the Pacific. That means teaching our kids about the Pacific, dedicating resources to reporting on the region, and importantly, discussing

migration policy as it relates to the Pacific. One thing is for certain: jumping up and down whenever Pacific Island governments turn to China for a piece of infrastructure is not a strategy that will win us friends or influence in the region.

Link:

<http://www.devpolicy.org/australias-relationships-with-pacific-should-not-be-about-china-20180625/>

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Attachment 4



# The time is right for a ‘step-up’ in ABC broadcasting to the Pacific

By Jemima Garrett

Broadcasting can touch the heart, inspire the mind and set ideas into action, but in the Pacific it is struggling.

It has been four years since the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC's) respected voice in the region was almost silenced by budget cuts. Now China is using former ABC radio [frequencies](#) and the Australian government is [reviewing](#) Asia Pacific broadcasting.

The review comes as media freedom in the Pacific is under greater challenge and audiences in significant parts of the Papua New Guinea Highlands and islands, Bougainville, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu have no service.

Beyond Melanesia, there are now ten Pacific Islands Forum countries that no longer receive any FM or shortwave radio from the ABC. Television from the ABC is patchy and has barely any Pacific-focussed programming. The ABC's online, mobile and streaming services are only available to those who can afford internet data or, in limited form, through Facebook, which is offered free by some phone providers.

A [review](#) of Australian broadcasting services in the Asia Pacific (now being conducted by the Department of Communications and the Arts and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade) came about as a result of the Pacific's angry response to the ABC's [decision](#) to end all shortwave broadcasting in January 2017.

The ABC argued shortwave technology was old and served a very limited audience. It promised to 'redirect funds towards an extended content offering and a robust FM distribution network'. FM radio is high-quality audio but its signal rarely reaches beyond a 70 km radius and is known to be blocked by hills and mountains. Shortwave on the other hand can have a powerful signal that can be received on low cost, battery powered radios by remote communities over tens of thousands of square kilometres (as heard [here](#) in Pentecost, Vanuatu, in 2012).

With its transmitters located in Australia, shortwave cannot be turned off by hostile regimes (such as in Fiji in 2009) or put out of action by heavy weather. Shortwave penetrates rugged landscapes and its reach is not limited to major cities.

The critical value of ABC services to the region is seen in the unusual step taken by Vanuatu's Prime Minister Charlot Salwai when he wrote to a [Senate inquiry](#) last year. He told the senators that the loss of ABC shortwave 'could cost many, many lives in the likelihood of another major natural disaster like Cyclone Pam in 2015'.

Out of the ashes of that Senate inquiry came an agreement between Senator Nick Xenophon and the government to hold the present review. The review may be an orphan (as Graeme Dobell [suggests](#)) but it could also become the catalyst for a new model of significantly-upgraded ABC broadcasting to the Pacific — hopefully one that would be a real partnership with the region and offer a range of specialist programs made by and for Pacific audiences.

The review has a wide [terms of reference](#) and asks that institutions, organisations and individuals in the region, as well as Australians, set out their views.

What is needed is some big thinking, as Tess Newton Cain [suggested](#) in the Vanuatu Daily Post.

ABC Radio Australia used to be the only broadcaster carrying informed and accurate policy debate on regional issues to all sub-regions of the Pacific Islands Forum on a high-quality signal. The 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper barely mentioned international broadcasting and in doing so [underestimated](#) the value of good journalism to Australia's national interest. This is a crucial moment for Australia, which is on the point of losing its critical mass of journalists able to bring a deep understanding of the region to their reporting. As [Matt Dornan](#) and [Ashlee Betteridge](#) have noted in Devpolicy blog posts recently, leaving it to the

parachute journalists is worse than embarrassing.

The people of the region do not underestimate the value of ABC journalism , as seen in their instantaneous reaction to news of [major cuts in 2014](#). The government's decision to end Australia Network funding (\$220 million over ten years) had knock-on effects. The ABC decided close Radio Australia's 24/7 FM radio stations in the north and eastern Pacific: in Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, Kiribati and the Cook Islands.

The day the ABC's intention to do this became public knowledge I received more than 60 emails from concerned listeners, including Palau's Minister of Culture and Community Affairs Baklai Temengil who wrote in dismay:

*I ... listen to Radio Australia all the time. Radio Australia ... connects us to each other to share ideas and best practices that we can help each other in all our countries development and similarities of the Pacific.*

Glen Hurry, then Executive Director of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission based in the Federated States of Micronesia, wrote:

*Here in Pohnpei ABC Radio Pacific is very popular and well-regarded. ... The Pacific is a key foreign policy consideration for Australia. If we are to get good long-term policy up then we need to keep people informed so they can make decisions. This is our only medium to do this.*

Since 2014 there have been dramatic changes in the landscape of international broadcasting, with many countries ramping up their activities, [China](#) in particular. Radio New Zealand Pacific and TVNZ have taken over the ABC's mantel as lead regional broadcaster with around double the staff of the ABC Pacific service. [RNZ Pacific](#) continues with shortwave: both standard shortwave and the still experimental digital shortwave known as DRM.

Funding for international broadcasting is also being expanded rapidly. The BBC World Service just received its biggest [funding injection](#) since the 1940s (of AUD\$156 million a year) and it too is looking to increase its role in the Pacific. To put this in perspective, if the ABC were to receive a similar funding increase (proportional to population) it would amount to more than \$50 million a year.

The review of Asia Pacific broadcasting is all about reach - the first step in reaching audiences is to touch hearts and inspire minds with quality original content made to respond to their needs. With new digital technology and communications becoming cheaper by the day, a new model for Pacific broadcasting could include many more collaborations and co-productions, jobs for Pacific journalists and creatives and greater involvement of Pasifika communities in Australia. Podcast and video funds would strengthen the Pacific media and enable it to much better explain important policy debates to the public, as well as offer opportunities for aid organisations and academics to pitch programs. Broadcasting in Pacific languages, particularly Tok Pisin, is important as Pacific Islands Forum Secretary General Dame Meg Taylor [mentioned](#) on Radio Australia's Pacific Beat program last week.

International broadcasting (and associated online offerings) is the only 'soft power' tool able to reach a mass audience. Its independence from government is both essential and an asset, as a landmark Lowy Institute [report](#) concluded.

That same report noted both sides of politics in Australia have failed to grasp the importance of international broadcasting to our region and to Australia's interests. 'The resilience of Australia's international broadcasters has been severely tested by poorly coordinated and erratic support from government,' the report concluded.

The ABC too has been guilty of a failure to grasp the importance of its service to the region and the national interest. Since it axed shortwave it has opened only two new FM stations (in PNG), with another on the way, and it has under-

resourced programs to the point that broadcast hours have been cut again.

With concerns about China's intentions in the region, now is the time to put some broadcasting spring into Malcolm Turnbull's promised ['step up'](#) in the Pacific.

The door is open.

'We are pleased ...that there is now going to be an inquiry in relation to broadcasting and communications in the Pacific,' Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells [told](#) Pacific Beat last week.

'Out of that may come a series of recommendations which obviously, with any inquiry, the government will look at and respond accordingly.'

The review of Australian broadcasting in the Asia Pacific is taking submissions [here](#) until Friday 3 August.

Link:

<http://www.devpolicy.org/the-time-is-right-for-a-step-up-in-abc-broadcasting-to-the-pacific-20180709/>

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