

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

A submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Future of Public Interest Journalism

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Introduction

Our centre has decided to make a submission to this inquiry as the quality of public interest reporting is not just the purview of journalism academics and media practitioners – it affects everyone, particularly those at organisations that are looking to make evidence-based contributions to strengthen public debate and policy discourse.

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 issues such as: Australian aid and development policy; Australia's place in the Pacific region; and Australia's involvement on the global stage on international development issues, including on the sustainable development goals, climate negotiations and financing.

This submission will focus on the following three key areas: the importance of public interest journalism to the Pacific region and Australia's engagement with it; the importance of public interest journalism to policy debates, drawing on the example of

our own field of aid policy; and the role that universities and centres such as ours now play in attempting to fill the gap in coverage on issues of public importance.

Throughout, we draw on our centre's experience 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), Australia's leading source of analysis on aid and development issues.

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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:

- 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.
- The ending of shortwave radio broadcasts by the ABC into the Pacific region in early 2017.
- 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), and Daniel Flitton (Fairfax). 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 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.

1. 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.

2. 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 the region, and to have a strong understanding of it.
3. 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 provided by local media, and disseminate vitally important information, particularly during natural disasters, political upheavals or other emergencies.
4. Media capacity and the quality of reportage in the Pacific and PNG is still low, with the media only comprising a small number of outlets in most countries and 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). 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.
5. The Australian aid program makes several investments in trying to build the capacity of local journalists in the Pacific through programs such as the Australia Awards and the Pacific Media Assistance Scheme (PACMAS). Yet leading by

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

6. The Foreign Minister has repeatedly emphasised her own passion for the Pacific and the importance of the Australian relationship with the region. She has particularly emphasised the need for economic development — but investors and businesses need access to timely and accurate information about political, trade and other news developments. Hence, the decline of Australian Pacific coverage, particularly from public broadcasters, lacks policy coherence.

While there is likely no simple fix to this lack of regional 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, and hence turn the tide on Australians' decreasing knowledge and understanding of some of their nearest neighbours.

Recommendation 1: That the government consider the importance of supporting public broadcasters (ABC and SBS) to have foreign correspondents based in the Pacific region, and that the importance of these roles and regional coverage is reflected in funding decisions.

Recommendation 2: That the government recognise the important contribution that quality Australian journalism on the Pacific region makes to Australian perceptions of the Pacific, and to governance and accountability in the Pacific region itself, and ensure that future funding decisions in regard to public broadcasters do not impact on access.

Public interest journalism and Australian aid policy

As Australia's leading think tank on aid and development policy, a policy area that is often overlooked in media coverage in favour of those with a domestic focus, the current challenges facing the media industry have revealed themselves particularly sharply in our efforts to inform conversations on Australian aid effectiveness.

Australian aid policy has faced significant changes in the past five years:

- The drastic shift from the 'scale up' period of Australian aid, where aid was expected to double, to the largest cuts to Australian aid ever occurring since 2014, which have effectively negated the impact of the scale-up on the aid budget.
- The end of AusAID as an executive agency, with aid functions absorbed into the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) in 2014.

As analysts of these issues it has been clear to us that, beyond the work of a handful of journalists with an interest in foreign aid and development, many of these significant shifts 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.

This has been reflected in recent speeches by Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Senator Concetta Fierravanti Wells, Minister for International Development and the Pacific.

“...many Australians believe that our aid budget should reflect our tight budgetary environment. Now some Australians are asking why we are spending money on our neighbours at a time when their economies are growing and their prosperity is rising. As a result, the political paradigm within which we now operate has changed dramatically. One only has to listen.”

—Senator Concetta Fierravanti Wells, Minister for International Development and the Pacific, [17 February 2017](#).

[Our own research](#) on public opinion polling shows that this is not necessarily the case, with a majority of Australians still supporting aid, and public weariness on aid cuts.

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 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 (as illustrated in the August 2016 Development Policy Centre Policy Brief titled [Communication post-integration: reloading Australia’s efforts](#)). This means that even good news stories about aid initiatives are not being circulated or promoted by the department responsible for aid delivery and aid policy.

For those looking to dig, or to perhaps even access basic information about what aid is being spent on, our centre’s second transparency audit¹, released in December 2016, showed significant decreases in project-level information on the DFAT website when compared to the first transparency audit of the AusAID website in 2013. The average availability of preliminary project information declined by almost 25 percentage points, and the average availability of project-level documentation by six percentage points.

Government cannot force the media to cover aid policy, or any policy area, no matter how important. And it is understandable to some extent that domestic policy issues, which impact on the everyday lives of Australians, do attract more focus. 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

¹ See DeCoursey, V and Burkot, C 2016 [Gone backward: findings from the 2016 Australian aid transparency audit](#), Development Policy Centre: Canberra.

bolstering departmental efforts to clearly and openly communicate the work that they do (which may in turn attract media interest).

Recommendation 3: That government departments provide information transparently and allow access by journalists as much as possible to support the accurate and informed coverage of policy issues.

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.

We briefly outline three such initiatives below:

The Devpolicy Blog

Established in September 2010, the [Devpolicy Blog](http://devpolicy.org) (devpolicy.org) provides a platform for the best in aid and development analysis, research and policy comment, with global coverage and a focus on Australia, the Pacific and Papua New Guinea. As of the beginning of 2017, Devpolicy has published over 1,620 blogs from more than 560 contributors.

Devpolicy Blog is frequently cited in news articles about aid and development published by the Australian media, and pieces are often republished in Pacific newspapers, on websites and blogs (Devpolicy publishes under a Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 license, allowing content to be shared freely by other outlets). Research or developments brought to light on the blog have also been followed up by the media, forming the basis for crucial reporting on topics such as Pacific labour mobility, Australian aid effectiveness and the Australia-PNG relationship.

Aid Profiles

Our [Aid Profiles](http://devpolicy.org/aidprofiles) series (devpolicy.org/aidprofiles) launched in February 2016, and aims to showcase individuals who have made a significant contribution to the cause of international development which inspires others, which is of lasting and significant value, which has a link to Australia, and which has not yet been adequately recognised. The profiles take the format of long-form multimedia features, and are freely disseminated on the Aid Profiles website for other media outlets to pick up, with the ultimate aim of promoting the efforts of those who go above and beyond in contributing to the world at large, and to encourage public support for such initiatives.

The Australian Aid Tracker

Launched on 27 January 2016, the [Australian Aid Tracker](http://devpolicy.org/aidtracker) (devpolicy.org/aidtracker) draws on a range of data and Devpolicy analysis, and uses a variety of visualisation and charting tools to help bring the numbers on Australian aid to life. It's an independent, user-friendly and up-to-date look at Australian aid, intended to serve as a resource for journalists, advocates, policymakers and politicians, and interested members of the public. It is updated on Federal Budget night, and when new data releases are made by DFAT or the OECD DAC. Since its launch, Aid Tracker data has been cited in numerous news articles and reports, including to fact-check statements made on aid and development in the public domain. The creation of the site was sparked in response to a lack of clear, understandable aid information and data on the DFAT website, and frequent errors or misinterpretations in journalistic reporting of Australian aid.

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 trained in journalism. After all, the performance of academics is still nearly wholly judged on academic publication and teaching — not their forays into journalism.

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 (particularly in the case of The Conversation’s Fact Check team), 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.

Recommendation 4: That the government recognise the role that universities play in informing policy and public discourse, fostering analysis and providing news content, particularly in an age of declining public interest journalism from mainstream media outlets. University and research funding models should acknowledge the importance of these activities and support them.

Conclusion

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.

This is something that we have seen first-hand, particularly in the decline of coverage on the Pacific region, and the limited public discussion of significant changes to Australian aid policy, such as repeated cuts to the aid budget.

It is also something that we, as a relatively small think tank at The Australian National University, have attempted to provide assistance with through the provision of multiple online products that more clearly provide information about our areas of specialty, and

that provide news and analysis content on these areas for free through Creative Commons licensing.

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.

Summary of recommendations

Recommendation 1: That the government consider the importance of supporting public broadcasters (ABC and SBS) to have foreign correspondents based in the Pacific region, and that the importance of these roles and regional coverage is reflected in funding decisions.

Recommendation 2: That the government recognise the important contribution that quality Australian journalism on the Pacific region makes to Australian perceptions of the Pacific, and to governance and accountability in the Pacific region itself, and ensure that future funding decisions in regard to public broadcasters do not impact on access.

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