

Recognition for the Pacific journalism of Jemima Garrett

by Kevin McQuillan

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Jemima Garrett conducting an interview in Drimgas village, Western Province, Papua New Guinea

The importance of Pacific journalism has been recognised by the Australian government with the awarding of the [Medal of the Order of Australia](#) (OAM) to Jemima Garrett for her services to journalism.

Garrett has spent almost 40 years reporting on the Pacific and training regional journalists. She was South Pacific Correspondent for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) for seven years and a reporter for Radio Australia specialising in Pacific business and economics for almost 20 years after that.

The hallmark of Garrett's work has been to report the Pacific to Australia and the world in a way that enabled Pacific people and Australians of Pasifika and South Sea Islander background to have their voices heard.

A colleague of Jemima's since her ABC days, Graeme Dobell, now journalism fellow at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, observes that she is one of the pre-eminent Australian journalists in the South Pacific.

Jemima is always driven by her quest and her respect for Pacific voices, to hear and report and understand Pacific voices. She is a wonderful people person. The other dimension of this long professional and personal commitment is the effort to place Australia in the Islands. More than the "relationship", Jemima wants Australia to "be" in the Pacific. She wants Australia to see and embrace all the gifts and benefits it gets from being a Pacific nation, so that Australia truly hears those Pacific voices.

Garrett's interest in the Pacific began when she was on a family holiday in New Caledonia when she was in high school. "I looked out of the window of what was

then the sparkling new Club Med on Anse Vata Beach to see Kanak farmers in the field next door looking unhappy and impoverished,” she told the [Pacific Legal Network](#).

The contrast with the opulence of the Club Med got me thinking there must be more to this scene than I'd imagined from the tourist brochures I'd read on the plane. As it turned out, my first overseas assignment as the ABC's South Pacific Correspondent was covering the Kanak independence movement's uprising in 1988, a seminal moment for the region and one in which France brought its full military might to bear (even going as far as to consider using napalm and laser-guided rockets).

She and ABC colleague Jill Emberson produced the first Australian radio series to put the voices of Pacific women talking about issues of concern to them to air. She is author of the 1986 book [Island Exiles](#), the story of the Nauru citizens under Japanese occupation during World War Two.

By 2018, neglect by successive Australian governments and subsequent action by the ABC left Australian media and their connections in the region at their lowest point since World War Two. At the same time, the tech platform-driven crisis for journalism, increasing geopolitical tensions and burgeoning misinformation was taking a toll not just in Australia but across the region. This prompted the formation of the Australia Asia-Pacific Media Initiative (AAPMI) which aimed to build better understanding and communications between Australia and the Pacific.

This group of expert Australian and Pacific journalists and media leaders sought to reinstate a credible Australian international radio, television and digital media service, led by Garrett and former ABC colleague, Sue Ahearn, now the Pacific Editor of BenarNews.

The Coalition government led by Prime Minister Tony Abbott fulfilled a promise in 2014, originally made by former Prime Minister John Howard, to all but close down all international broadcasting. That was the catalyst for the slide to a nadir. Abbott's decision to slash funding for the ABC allowed, as analyst Graeme Dobell [pointed out](#), senior managers to “reduce electricity to the broadcast towers, degrading the shortwave signal — an act of technological bastardry. Poor, underpowered ABC signal strength meant that listeners couldn't hear programs, so the ABC could

announce that there was no shortwave audience. For an organisation that prides itself on technical excellence, this was shameful.”

Radio Australia and ABC TV’s international television arm were virtually closed down overnight, leaving just a handful of programs made specifically for regional audiences on rump cable television, FM radio and digital services.

This was in sharp contrast to [Radio New Zealand Pacific](#), which developed its digital shortwave service, taking over the space left by Radio Australia, as it recognised that Pacific Islanders relied on shortwave not just for weather warnings, but for daily news and current affairs. China also began investing more money in the Pacific, by building relationships with local broadcasters, buying space in newspapers and basing correspondents in the region.

Initial lobbying by the AAPMI looked as though it was working. In 2020, the Coalition government led by Prime Minister Scott Morrison attempted to thwart the influence of China’s soft power push in the region with A\$17 million in funding for Pacific broadcasting. But it was an own-goal. Morrison gave the money to the Australian commercial networks to rebroadcast their Australian-made soaps (Neighbours, MasterChef, The Voice, Border Security) on local TV stations in the region. There was no allocation for Pacific content — either by or for the people of the Pacific.

Garrett and the AAPMI stepped up the lobbying. As recognition of the role of quality, public interest media gained traction, an increase in funding for coverage of, and media connections with, the Pacific was forthcoming. In 2022, the Albanese Labor government allocated \$900 million to the Pacific, including \$32 million for its [Indo-Pacific Broadcasting Strategy](#) (IPBS). As a result of the IPBS more full-time journalists are now employed in the Pacific to file news for Pacific and Australia audiences.

The training of journalists has been a particular forte of Garrett’s, with recent work largely funded through the Australian government’s [Pacific Media Assistance Scheme](#) (PACMAS). Workshops in a variety of Pacific nations have focussed on training local journalists how to read and report government budgets and finances. Other important topics include basic business and economics reporting such as deciphering jargon, how to read statistics, conducting checks on government spending, the role of a finance watchdog and how to establish business contacts.

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