

## ABC AS SEEN FROM SOLOMON ISLANDS draft 2.

26-06-18

### *AusGov Terms of reference for the Review*

**Purpose.** The objective of the review is to assess the reach of Australia's media in the Asia Pacific region, including examining whether shortwave radio technology should be used.

Scope. The review will analyse the:

- coverage and access of existing Australian media services in the Asia Pacific region; and
- use and value of Australian shortwave technology in the Asia Pacific region.

The review will cover:

- all media distribution platforms (i.e. television, radio and online);
- commercial, community and publicly funded services; and
- different types of technologies such as analogue, digital and satellite radio and television services and online services.

### **SIBC Notes:**

1. Some activists within and from outside the ABC have sent their views as to how the media in the Islands should see the ABC. The Australian Government briefing paper received shows ABC was regarded in Australia as the leading international broadcaster, in that the ABC had 'unrivalled credibility' and reach.

By comparison, the BBC's international service broadcast in the Pacific did not provide daily news reporting of Pacific issues. New Zealand's international services reported on the Pacific but did not have staff based in Asia or a comprehensive transmission in Melanesia and Micronesia.

In January 2017 the ABC closed its shortwave transmissions to the Pacific, a move which particularly affected audiences in regional and outer island communities in Melanesia.  
(AusGov Docs)

ABC now recognises New Zealand as the leading international broadcaster in the Pacific.

2. **PICs. There is no description of the ability or otherwise of national broadcasting stations in the region** to provide their own versions of international news in the documentation sent by the Department of Communications and the Arts and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

It is not immediately clear if the Aust Gov't knows the extent of coverage of international events, issues and affairs by the national and commercial broadcasters of the region. It is possible that the Australian Government does not know what the situation is of national and commercial broadcasters in PICs.

What ABC and DFAT policy want to achieve is for all Pacific Islanders to understand the issues, events and happenings throughout Australia and the world through Aussie lenses. This is fair enough: it is their system.

It also means they think we are not capable of our own analysis and reporting of world events. This is something we have to analyse and study for ourselves. SIBC has a policy of running a minimum of one regional and one international news story in each bulletin.

ABC and DFAT should know via its Pacific Media Assistance Scheme (PACMAS) but SIBC management is not confident that PACMAS is capable of understanding the environment PIC broadcasters work in. This gives us to believe ABC does not understand the PIC region in broadcasting terms at all.

**3. Technology.** Australia itself is undergoing major changes in broadcasting by moving from analogue to digital broadcasts. PIC broadcasters will be upgrading as soon as they have the capital to invest in these.

If ABC is to resume transmissions on MW and SW to the PICs, it should do so using **digital technology**. This will help create the market which enables its islanders to buy digital receivers.

To continue analogue transmissions is to continue to cripple people who can only buy cheap Chinese analogue receivers which are the bane of island broadcasters. In SI, lots of villagers report being unable to hear our analogue transmissions. When visited, we find they have cheap Chinese imports.

**4. FM.** This is great for the islands, and the smaller the islands the better. But there will be many gaps between population centres because of the short range of transmitters and hilly terrain. This is appropriate technology at the right cost for our social environment of many languages and dialects. It is not 'cheap' as intimated in the briefing document.

SIBC is rolling out its Unity FM network which will see FM transmitters located in strategic rural areas. One objective is to use dialects from these studios.

**5. Television.** Australia does not demonstrate any understanding of the Islands peoples in its programming on ABC or ABC Plus. The programmes are Australia-centric and clearly intended to serve Australians wherever they are. This is fine if that is their policy.

An SBS style regular program featuring one PIC each week would be appreciated by Islanders. An example of a good TV production with PIC content is the SPC's 'Pacific Way' which is distributed monthly.

The SPC could be persuaded to provide weekly programs if ABC TV would underwrite some of their costs and then air these programs weekly. This way not only the PIC viewers enjoy learning about each other, but Australians will learn a lot about the Islands region next to them. SPC has a huge collection of visuals/images going as far back as 1950s soon after it was created and they are adding to this collection every week.

While I was writing this I noticed SBS's Stefan Armbruster posted stories on FB with video clips. This demonstrates SBS interest in the Melanesian Arts and Cultural Festival. It could have engaged other camera staff to work with Stefan and upload material every evening. Trouble is our only TV station only relays ABC and not SBS. But this can be changed.

**6. On-line.** This space is already being taken up by many in-country and in-region already and ABC need not worry about doing more than it is doing now.

## **7. Perceptions and realities**

It should not be important for ABC to try to regain what it regards its top position of International Broadcaster to the Pacific. The truth is that this was a perception of Australians who live in the islands. What it can usefully do is supplement the international services already provided by national broadcasters.

Citizens of PICs listen to their own national broadcasters, many of which carry or relay international news. Islander will always be polite and say 'yes we like RA and we listen to it'. The other truth is that they listen sparingly and mainly to relays of RA on their national services. I myself listen five days a week in mid-afternoon to the RA programme which I find interesting. I hear it on the ABC FM transmitter serving Honiara and environs which is maintained by SIBC under contract. SIBC would be happy to host other ABC FM transmitters in each of the Provincial Centres.

ABC should review its PACMAS project by engaging professionals who have experience at the highest and widest levels to ensure PACMAS understands the realities of living on Islands. They could learn from the regional expert on Nissology\* Prof. Grant McCall who is an Aussie and lives in Sydney. It would benefit from being run by another Australian media group unrelated to the ABC, for reasons already stated.

Nissology: 'The study of Islands on their own terms'. (McCall G 2014)