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*“Snap and crackle goes pop: a case study of the provision of mobile, digital, shortwave and FM news and current affairs broadcast and published by Radio Australia in 2009.”*

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Many in the Australian and international broadcasting community were surprised in 2009 when the managing director of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Mark Scott, announced his intention to take on the likes of CNN and the BBC in consolidating the broadcaster's presence in the Asia Pacific region, as well as rolling out new services in Africa, Latin America and the Middle East (ABC online news, 2009). Scott said the proposal was not just about expanding Australia's influence in its own back yard, but protecting it.

We cannot abdicate our role as an independent credible voice in the region. Reflecting Australia to the world, without conflicting commercial objectives, requires credibility, a track record of effective engagement, and an ability to be diplomatically deft, without sacrificing key attributes and values of quality journalism (Scott 2009)

At the centre of this push is the ABC's international news and current affairs division, the Asia Pacific News Centre (APNC). The APNC news operation describes itself as "unrivalled in the region" and features a 60-strong team of journalists and producers in Melbourne, and specialist reporters based around Australia who: "Explore a range of new approaches to news production through the use of the latest digital broadcast technology" (ABC 2007/08 p 31).

Until Scott's landmark speech on the ABC's international operations, few had heard of the APNC. It was created in 2008, without fanfare, after the ABC created ABC International to manage the day-to-day activities of Radio Australia and Australia Network Television and transferred the long held responsibility for the provision of news to the ABC's News Division. The arrangement has quarantined the news as an independent service not caught up in the contractual and funding arrangements of Radio Australia and Australia Network, under the umbrella of ABC International. Scott described the merger of news teams under one editorial management as a "formidable cross-platform unit, capable of providing breaking news coverage across television, radio

and online and utilising the experience of staff with expert knowledge of the beats they are covering” (Scott 2009).

The funding distinction is important, because Radio Australia has an ongoing funding arrangement as part of the ABC’s international broadcasting responsibilities. However, Australia Network currently operates under a contract with Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and, at the time of writing, was being publicly challenged for the contract by Sky News (Callaghan 2009 p 16). Scott’s comments can be seen to be directly targeted at the commercial challenger: “When you look at the expansion of international broadcasting as an arm of soft diplomacy, Governments are using their public broadcasters to do this work. You shouldn’t outsource your diplomatic efforts” (Scott 2009).

During 2009, the only tangible sign of the internal change (apart from the television newsreaders signoff) was the creation of the online newsites [www.radioaustralianews.com.au](http://www.radioaustralianews.com.au) and [www.australianetworknews.com.au](http://www.australianetworknews.com.au). However there were significant changes within the two newsrooms, including an increase in training in online news production by both radio and television staff, and cross training in radio and television by news producers and reporters (Steele 2009). This paper concentrates on the impact of the merger on the production of radio news and current affairs in 2009. Through the use of one-on-one interviews with key APNC and ABC International staff it builds on the work of my earlier paper *The internet won’t kill the radio star: a case study of the provision of digital news services to Asia and the Pacific by Radio Australia* (Wake 2009) which detailed the changes to the online news websites at the APNC in 2009.

### **The research question**

This research set out to look at the changes at ABC International and the Asia Pacific News Centre in 2009 as a result of the creation of the APNC and in the light of Scott's ambitions for ABC International. The staff were asked about their visions and concerns about the future provision of news and current affairs via FM, shortwave, digital or mobile technologies, and the managing director's public statement about the role the organization would play in soft diplomacy.

They are: ABC International director Murray Green, Radio Australia chief executive officer, Hanh Tran, the Asia Pacific News Centre acting head Deborah Steele, ABC International Digital Development executive producer Damien Dempsey, Radio Australia senior editor Barry Clarke, Radio Australia's manager of partnerships and rebroadcasting John Westland, ABC International's marketing strategist Mark Hemetsberger, Radio Australia's Tok Pisin service's executive producer Pearson Vetuna, APNC online editor Scott Longmuir. It should be noted that in May 2010, Tran and Clarke announced they were taking on new positions. Tran has signalled his intention to return to an editorial role, while Clarke has taken a position in Cambodia at RNK (Cambodia's national radio) in an advisory/training/mentoring role regarding programs and helping identify training needs.

The interviews were held at the ABC's Melbourne headquarters in November and December 2009. The researcher continues to be employed as a casual editor in APNC at Radio Australia and should be regarded as a participant/observer for this paper.

### **ABC International and the APNC**

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation is required by law to do three things: to broadcast domestically, to support the arts, and to broadcast internationally. The *ABC ACT 1983* (Cwlth) Section 6 (1b) states clearly that functions of the Corporation including transmitting to:

countries outside Australia broadcasting programs of news, current affairs, entertainment and cultural enrichment that will: (i) encourage awareness of Australia and an international understanding of Australian attitudes on world affairs; and (ii) enable Australian citizens living or travelling outside Australia to obtain information about Australian affairs and Australian attitudes on world affairs (ABC 2008 p 33).

When this legislative responsibility is considered, Scott's ambitions for the ABC does not seem out of context. His four-stage plan includes adding five news bureaus in the Asia Pacific. This would give the ABC a total of 14 bureaus in Asia, the Pacific and India – more than either CNN or the BBC. Secondly, expanding the ABC's footprint into 53 countries in Africa and 22 in the Middle East, with additional news bureaus and Arabic-language audio content for radio and online. The third stage included a rollout to Latin America which would open the doors to another 21 countries. The fourth stage would take the ABC into the Europe and North America via broadband delivery systems, and "give Australia a truly global platform" (Scott 2009).

Scott warned that Australia needed take advantage of the opportunities in the Pacific, as other countries, such as China were showing no such reluctance. "As we focus on our broadcasting and project work in the region at the ABC, we never ceased to be amazed by the level of Chinese investment in all aspects of Pacific infrastructure, including communications" (Scott 2009).

ABC International was created in February 2007 as the umbrella division for all of the corporation's international activities, apart from news. For the first time international was

considered a stand alone division, not a sidebar activity, to ABC functions. The division consisted of Australia Network Television, which in 2009 was available in 44 nations in the Asia Pacific region through 22 million homes via satellite but broadcast mostly as part of local cable packages. It was seen from Korea and Mongolia in the north and India and Pakistan to the west. The second part of the division was Radio Australia which has been around for 70 years and was now broadcasting in eight languages across the Pacific and as far east as the Cook Islands. The third, and often overlooked part of the division is *ABC International Projects*. In Papua New Guinea, the Solomons, Vanuatu, Cambodia and Vietnam, *International Projects* were working with local media corporations to build corporate, business, editorial and infrastructure skills. This work was entirely self-funding with support from agencies such as AusAID and the World Bank (Scott 2009).

### **ABC International's operating environment**

Radio Australia and Australia Network already operate in a range of complex media and political environments in the various target countries. To date the networks have targeted Asia and the Pacific, but each nation has different laws and regulations, and each market has different needs. Radio Australia broadcasts in eight language groups, all considered important in the target markets: English, Standard Chinese, French, Tok Pisin, Indonesian, Khmer, Burmese, and Vietnamese. The technological circumstances in Vietnam are unique and have allowed the APNC to shut down its shortwave service and provide an online service. However no other country has the exact same conditions as Vietnam. In Cambodia, where the control of the media is not so total, Radio Australia has FM transmitters that broadcast Radio Australia content and online services that link up with grassroots movement such as health networks. In China, for example, Australia Television has no 'landing rights' for its content, but Radio Australia has a good

relationship with China National Radio and China Radio International and content is exchanged with them. “The relationship [with China] is very cordial” (Tran 2009).

In Burma there is no official contact with the ruling regime, so Radio Australia broadcasts into the country via the only channel available, shortwave. The Internet is strictly controlled in the country and it is very expensive so the ABC believes it is not going to be a mass medium for a long time. In the Pacific the majority of the online infrastructure is very unreliable. However Radio Australia will soon increase its number of FM transmitters from 11 to 14 covering the major urban cohorts.

But in the areas (of the Pacific) we can't reach with FM we have to use shortwave. And in PNG, the biggest country in the Pacific people... we use mostly shortwave to reach them mostly because internet infrastructure is not reliable (Tran 2009).

The Asia Pacific News Centre is run by an executive from the News Division, but the resources come from ABC International via an internal service level agreement. This covers the service provided, how it is delivered, the expectations of quality, and the look and feel of programming. ABC International and the News Division consult over the appointment of key personnel but Green says the service was run in the same way as the rest of the ABC. Green hailed the efficiencies of the newsroom merger saying that it was best way to get value from the journalists in both radio and television.

We brought together the journalists of RA and the journalists of ANT who work on the same floor, in the same building, across the same atrium, chasing the same stories, but until that point of November last year (2008) didn't talk to each other, except informally in the café. And this seemed to be highly inefficient, editorially weak. So what we did was that we assigned the journalists working for RA to the same group as those working for the ANT and created the APNC under the one editorial management (Green 2009).

The Asia Pacific News Centre acting head Deborah Steele agreed efficiencies created by combining the newsrooms functions allowed reporters and producers to work on their

strengths – the generation of original stories. Steele argued the future of the APNC relied on original stories.

There is nothing to be gained from turning around wire copy. We need to be about original stories. We are looking at was of extending our practice (of generating original stories) to the rest of the ABC (Steele 2009).

Steele said the APNC was taking the concept of a tri-media newsroom further than the rest of the ABC as part of the bid to increase the number of original stories produced:

Most of those newsrooms still regard online as an add on. We have determined that online has to be front and central of what we do, that is an important area of audience growth. We also have more Video Journalists than most other newsrooms and have an active policy of reinforcing VJ skills (Steele 2009).

ABC management has acknowledged a need for increased international coverage and operations, with a 2009 review by the ABC News Director Kate Torney stating in an all-staff memo that she wanted to:

ensure that we continue to provide our audiences with the best coverage of international issues from an Australian perspective, that our operations are sustainable, and that we are able to serve our existing and emerging programs and services across all platforms, including the capacity to deliver a news channel (Torney, 2009).

Torney told staff there would be no bureau closures and no reduction in the number of correspondents. However she did signal, among a list of cost cutting measures, a reallocation of resources to ensure the ABC had the appropriate number of people in the right places to best serve its audiences. Importantly she announced plans to open new bureaus in Asia, improve coordination between the domestic and international news operations, the establishment of an Asian hub in Jakarta to service the ASEAN/Japan region, and an upgrading of both Port Moresby and Johannesburg with television production facilities.

Our aim is to protect and further develop the reputation and integrity of our international coverage, to ensure that our foreign reporting remains a cornerstone of what we do and that it is sustainable in a fast-changing media environment (Torney 2009).



In an all-staff email Torney (Torney 2010) gave detail to her plans stating the ABC was investigating making Jakarta a three-correspondent Asian hub, including Australia Network resources, to provide back-up for Bangkok, New Delhi and a proposed additional bureau in Asia, while a Beijing hub would provide back-up for Tokyo. Australia would provide support for Port Moresby and New Zealand.

### **Taking on the CNN and BBC**

Torney's planned changes to the international operations are in line with Scott's vision for the future of the ABC, outlined in a speech in 2009 in which he argued that by boosting the funds available for content, the ABC would be able to become the dominant regional provider of news, information and English-language learning material (Scott 2009). However, the financial reality is such that few within the organisation have interpreted Scott's vision for a full on assault of the might of the BBC or CNN. As Green states, ABC International would not be able to challenge the BBC and CNN upfront, simply as a result of funding. The ABC estimates the BBC spends \$AU870 million a year on its international services between BBC News and the BBC World Service. CNN does not spend as much as that, but it's certainly more than the \$AU34 million funding split between Radio Australia and Australia Network Television (Green 2009):

There is a big gap between \$870 and \$34 million. We don't have any aspiration to be a major global player like the BBC but we do have the aspiration to be a significant media leader in terms of news and information and English language services, documentaries and drama and sport in Asia and the Pacific (Green 2009).

Steele also did not believe the ABC was about to turn into a mini-BBC or CNN.

"We are realistic about what we can achieve and is what is ambitious. We are lucky to have a managing director (Scott) who is not just an advocate of news and CAFF but for the Asia Pacific region" (Steele 2009). She also pointed out that while the BBC and CNN

have tremendous audiences and quality content, there were perceptions of them in the region that the ABC had worked hard to avoid:

We are a partner in the region. We are facilitating the discussion. One the whole we are keen to provide an Australian perspective (Steele 2009).

Steele was pragmatic about what the expansion would mean to the APNC.

It is not that we would be covering Africa in the same way that we cover or that we aspire to cover Asia. It is a matter of providing that content to an African audience it is a matter of being the source of Asia Pacific news in Africa. There are lots of bridges being built between Asia and the Pacific and Africa. A lot of donor money is going in from the region to Africa, there is a lot of interest from China in Africa (Steele 2009).

Radio Australia marketed its product in the region by emphasising its ability to provide a unique range of Asia and Pacific coverage that local broadcasters could not do themselves. Radio Australia's manager of partnerships and rebroadcasting John Westland put it like this:

We say to people in the Pacific, you report Solomon Islands better than anyone else does, but can you tell me what is going on Tuvalu, CNMI, or in Fiji? We can give you a pan-Pacific service that develops your attachment to the rest of the Pacific, we cover all of those countries (Westland 2009).

But Radio Australia also marketed its services by promising to act as a partner, not a competitor or as a big brother.

We say we want you to learn from us. We can set standards of journalism that you might find difficult and we want your journalists to present material and in a sense set a standard and when we first started our partnerships arrangements. We build a low level attempt to provide some training or some mentoring. Out of that has grown the international projects division of the ABC and now instead of it being a side issue in our partnership it became a cottage industry and is now a fully fledged dept within the organisation (Westland 2009).

ABC International and News Division staff clearly believed that listeners accessed APNC news and current affairs because of a reputation built up, at least in the case of Radio Australia, over 70 years.

Australia goes variously from being more involved to less involved in Asia to more involved again, depending on the government at the time. But I think both sides of politics realise that geographically we are here, that how important the region is, in a geopolitical sense and it becomes more so with the emergence of China and India as these two megapowers and mega-economies (Clarke 2009).

Although ABC's International's fortunes may wax and wane financially at the whim of the government, it strongly advocates its position as being independent from government in the tradition of the great public service broadcasters. As Green states:

There is a distinction between being independent from government and acting in Australia's interests (Green 2009).

Green, however, argued that to make the ABC's International Division strong it needed the same governance model as the BBC World Service, which was funded by the British Foreign and Commonwealth office. While this arrangement meant a number of constraints, it had dedicated funding.

The BBC World Service can not add a service or close down a service without getting the permission of the Foreign Office. That's what I mean by alignment. The BBC world service is still vigorously independent, but it is aligned with Britain's broader national interests. If they decided they wanted to start a service that was outside Britain's broader interests, then the foreign office, through that mechanism has the power of intervention (Green 2009).

### **How the Asia Pacific access ABC International**

People in the Asia Pacific can tune into Radio Australia via shortwave, satellite or FM radio, computer, phone or portable music player. Radio Australia services were available via shortwave transmission, but an increasing number of listeners, particularly in the Pacific, were tuning in via an ever increasing number of 24-hour FM services in key Asia-Pacific centres, or via rebroadcasts on local stations and outlets in countries across Asia and the Pacific (ABC 2007/08p 46). When Radio Australia services started at the beginning of World War 2, listeners used shortwave. Although shortwave has waned in popularity in the Asia Pacific, Radio Australia continues to make shortwave broadcasts from Melbourne. Radio Australia acknowledges on its website that shortwave signals

may be weaker than AM signals and may be subject to interference from other broadcasters' signals (ABC 2009).

The second way for Radio Australia listeners to access its services is via RA's own 24-hour FM transmitters which are installed in host countries with the approval of each nation's government. There were now fourteen 24-hour FM stations in the Pacific and another five in Asia (ABC 2009). Compared with shortwave, these FM frequencies have superior sound quality and accessibility, but they can be shut down by disaffected political leaders, as happened in Fiji at the order of the self appointed Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama in April 2009. Before the FM transmission was closed down, Radio Australia was recording an increase in urban audiences in Suva and Nadi. In 2004 Radio Australia's urban audience in Fiji was measured at least that 1%, but by 2008 it had grown to 23% (ABC 2009).

Audience growth in the Pacific was mainly, but not exclusively, due to the installation of Radio Australia's own transmitters. Audience research quoted in the 2008-09 annual report states that on average one in three urban radio listeners in the Pacific tuned in weekly to a Radio Australia program. This figure peaked in Vanuatu and Solomon Islands with 58% and 57% of urban audiences listening to RA (ABC 2009).

Thirdly, Radio Australia also had partnership agreements with FM stations in various countries to rebroadcast all or parts of its programming. For example, an hour of Khmer programming provided by Radio Australia is broadcast each weekday on a local station. In the 2007-08 annual report, Radio Australia stated it was continuing to seek strategic partnerships with compatible organisations, both domestic and regional (ABC 2007/08 p 94). Fourthly, Radio Australia programs could be accessed live via streaming or on

demand via MP3 download using a “Listen Now” player from the Radio Australia or Australia Network websites (ABC 2009).

### **Who uses ABC International?**

Although ABC International has not published detailed figures on its various audience, Green has committed to surveying audiences in the major regions to understand the aspirations and interests of the audiences. Green believed it was important to better know the audiences to connect with them:

If we are not connecting we are broadcasting to the clouds so that’s extremely important in terms of what we do (Green 2009).

ABC International’s marketing strategist Mark Hemetsberger said that for the past three years Radio Australia had seriously tracking its radio audience.

We have some very rich quantitative data, on our audience, more so than qualitative data, and you would have to say that probably 70 to 75% do not come from shortwave listening (Hemetsberger 2009).

Hemetsberger said early audience research showed there were challenges for ABC International in the way it dealt with online and mobile content.

The audiences we have on radio and the audiences we have online are completely different people. We have gaps in our research and we have to make some educated assumptions, which can be dangerous. But we have very different audiences for radio and online (Hemetsberger 2009).

### **Soft diplomacy**

The idea that the Australian Broadcasting Corporation had a role to play in soft diplomacy was not well understood by staff. A few thundered against the idea, as if the mention of the words harkened back to the old days of propaganda. However the managers interviewed for this research were much more pragmatic. Steele clearly saw the link between content and soft diplomacy:

I'm a firm believer that ignorance results in misunderstanding and the more we can inform our audiences about the Australian approach to issues, Australia's role in the region, and that includes the good, the bad, the ugly, the better in improving the understanding of our approach to those issues (Steele 2009).

Likewise Clarke linked the idea of soft diplomacy back to the ABC's charter requirement to reflect Australia in all its diversity to its neighbours. Clarke said he was not certain that the full diversity of Australia was always reflected in programming, but the intention was clearly there:

I do think that we can play a role and we do play a role in providing information about how Australians think about things. We don't just tell the good stories, we tell the not so good stories, and the unpleasant stories as well .... So, overall, people who have some sort of understanding of where we [Australia] sit, in terms of all manner of things (Clarke 2009).

Hanh Tran embraced the managing director's words and he used the example of an Australian teacher volunteering to work in an Indonesian school as another example of soft diplomacy:

You are basically presenting Australia as a helping hand but you still driven by your idealism and conviction and doing some good for locals. That is not propaganda. Propaganda is when you know you are telling a lie, when you must, that is something that is a total anathema to what we are doing now (Tran 2009).

However, Dempsey recognised that the words soft diplomacy could infuriate some people within the organisation. However he believed that it was not inconsistent with the ABC's charter obligations to say that. "I think it might be the best choice of phrase to describe it" (Dempsey 2009). However Westland said it did not help the corporation to be seen to be too aligned to the Australian government.

To me, we have enough trouble trying to separate ourselves from the function and role of government. How can we be a government-funded radio station without the government having a say in what we do? We fight like fury in the field to try to build that separation and have people understand the separation and for people to use words like "soft diplomacy" it undermines all of that effort (Westland 2009).

For the more junior member of staff, such as Longmuir, the idea of soft diplomacy did not figure in daily decisions. He accepted the need to run the bad stories about Australian society, alongside the good ones.

We don't shy away from the stories that make Australia look bad. We have to maintain the idea that we, [the ABC itself], are the impartial organization. We are not a propaganda device for Australia ... Not that we are going out of our way to make Australia look bad, but we are maintain that balance and we have to be a credible voice in Asia and the Pacific (Scott 2009).

### **Targeting elites**

For some, one of the most controversial aspects of Scott's speech was the reference to the APNC audience as "an aspiring middle class in the region". Scott said that the APNC audience was internationally focused "who value education, who aspire to develop their skills in English. Those with whom we want to work and who will be increasingly influential" (Scott 2009). These thoughts are not new. Radio Australia has recognised for some time that access to technology, for example, has restricted use of its services in many markets to the so-call "elites". In 2001, Radio Australia's then program director, Tony Hastings, said the Radio Australia Internet service targeted "elites" because of "their power to influence their nations".

Radio Australia has always tried to have an impact on decision-makers in the region, and clearly decision-makers are the sort of people who have access to this sort of technology. And even in countries where the uptake of the Internet is very low in absolute terms, for example in Indonesia, we're discovering that people at the top of that society are nevertheless accessing our material (Hastings 2001 in Burns 2008 p 344).

In 2009 the research group continued to strongly support the value of targeting elite sections of the community within each broadcast area although most suggested an alternative description of "leaders," "educated" or "aspirational". Green preferred the world "leaders" because they were people who were making a difference in their communities.

[They are] people who are leaders of government, of business, and of the arts and social infrastructure. We are certainly very keen to connect with them, but that is not the beginning and end of the story. We are keen to connect with people who may have an interest in Australia who, as I said may want to know of things beyond their borders (Green 2009).

Tran argued that for Radio Australia to make a difference it was important to influence policy makers, decision makers and opinion leaders in other countries. He said it was easier to target this group because the computer technology being used in Vietnam, for instance, was available to the educated and affluent in urban areas.

They look beyond their borders for information and so forth, so we reach these people by strategic necessity but also by coincidence and it's a way of making sure that the cascading down takes place (Tran 2009).

Steele preferred Scott's term "aspirational".

They have more access to and more expectations of such things as education and health service and they are in a part of the world that is travelling more. Infrastructure issues are increasingly important (Steele 2009).

Not all the audiences, however, were highly educated. The Tok Pisin service, which broadcast across the regional and remote areas of PNG, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, would not be considered "elite". However, it too was enjoying the impact of influencing decision makers or opinion leaders within the PNG community since the introduction of Radio Australia FM stations in Port Moresby and Lae. Vetuna said the expansion of the audience and reach of Radio Australia from the PNG highlands to the major cities had created an unexpected advantage.

Now when we call someone for an interview, a minister or somebody there is an immediate recognition of who we are. That sort of tells us that okay, they are now listening, they probably listen to us on the Tok Pisin service (Vetuna 2009).

However Steele said the term elites was becoming irrelevant because of changes in the Pacific.

I think it has become broader because of the social changes that are happening in the region and in the Pacific. There are more people travelling in the Pacific than



ever before. There are more people in the Pacific with a broader international interest than there ever were before. Education and tertiary education is becoming available to more people than ever before. There are changes there, so that even the term “elites” becomes irrelevant to some extent (Steele 2009).

There was a slight split in the Radio Australia management about whether or not they should be attracting a small number of elite audiences or a large audience share.

I don't think we can ever be anything other than a niche broadcaster. However, like anyone, else I am buoyed that in a survey in Vanuatu more than 50 per cent of the audience had heard content from Radio Australia in the past week. They are big numbers. In part I see that as a bit of a bonus. But it's not the be-all-and-end-all for us (Westland 2009).

Hemetsberg echoed the line about being a niche media provider.

We understand that we are not going to be the main media provider, so when we talk about growing audiences, we are trying to grow audiences with those who are interested in our content, so again it comes back to strategic alliances (Hemetsberger 2009).

Hemetsberger was quite clear in his belief that ABC International could not, and should not, be expected to provide services for all.

Are they off the radar? If they don't have batteries and electricity then yes they are. But then the next question I would ask is, is it our job though to put them on the radar. We are a broadcaster, we are not a humanitarian service, we have a job to do, and our job is to broadcast to a set of editorial guidelines and standards but we are not there to hold fundraisers, we are not there to prop up people in village that don't have incomes. I think they are noble things to do, but sometimes our business has got confused with its actual role (Hemetsberger 2009).

Scott was committed to a diversity of transmission platforms. He hailed the enduring nature of radio in the face of “flashy television offerings”.

It [radio] is cheap to receive. It is wireless. It is portable. For the audience it is engaging and personal. Despite all the other media on offer, from an array of television channels to your iPhone apps – the ABC's radio share is growing. And; radio is stronger when it works alongside television and online. To ensure content is delivered in the most appropriate medium, to cross-promote programs, stories and talent, to maximize efficiencies by repurposing content to different outlets (Scott 2009).

All of the interviewees perceived that the means of production and transmission of news and current affairs was constantly being changed within ABC International. “No one knows how we will end up using technology, whether it will be through a hand-held device, a sophisticated mobile phone everything is a work in progress in this digital era” (Clarke 2009).

Radio Australia used cuts in government funding, and the loss of the transmitting station on the Cox Peninsula in northern Australia to reorganise its services in 1997. Westland believes it was a difficult period which has ultimately brought rewards for the organization.

There were a lot of things that happened in 1997 that have given us considerable benefit and shocked us into radical changes in how we go about our business (Westland 2009).

In the past few years the Internet, in particular, had revolutionised the way broadcasters received and transmitted information.

Our Vietnamese service has abandoned shortwave broadcasting, in favour of a totally online service. We have the Indonesia service which has just introduced a blog, and a couple of younger broadcasters are contributing to that and guiding that from the Indonesian service. Even the Tok Pisin service has its own website and puts up some news service as well and one or two features as well (Clarke 2009).

Shortwave has long been the preferred technology for beaming information into countries where the media is controlled, such as Vietnam, China, Burma and North Korea.

However, increasingly the Internet was being used.

The Internet has lots of pathways to get around blockages, and the ingenuity of individuals is making attempts to block it ever more difficult and more futile (Westland 2009).

Tran said ABC International believed that one of the best ways of distributing Radio Australia content was to get other broadcasters to rebroadcast all, or parts, of the schedule.

When we get the national broadcaster of that country and rebroadcast our content to that country it is much more effective than getting transmitters to try and cover everything (Tran 2009).

Radio Australia had fundamentally moved into a rebroadcast phrase, working more as a production house rather than full-streaming radio programming. In English language programming, everything was geared to streaming 24 hours of radio in English, specialist radio to the Pacific and specialist radio to southeast Asia. However in the non-English services there had been a massive change in thinking.

We are moving away from people listening for a couple of hours on shortwave. Their focus is becoming produces of modules that will be placed on local radio stations. That is a change in content, in the way they make the content, and a change in the headspace because in a part you are moving away from the whole notion of flow broadcasting because you appear on something that is not Radio Australia. You are making Radio Australia content but you are appearing on Delta Radio in Jakarta (Westland 2009).

### **FM and shortwave**

Shortwave has been the backbone of Radio Australia since it was established 70 years ago. Although there has been a move to other mediums in many of RA's markets, it is still the transmitter of choice in the highlands of Papua New Guinea. However in 2009 the Burmese pro-democracy leader Aung Sung Suu Kyi asked the Australian government to commence shortwave broadcasts into Burma (Myanmar). Australia's Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said it would a "new channel of international contact for the people of Burma" (Rudd 2009). Tran said the launch of the new service was one of the proudest moments in his time as chief executive.

"This is the first new language service for Radio Australia in more than 15 years. As 2009 marks 70 years of Radio Australia's broadcasting to the region, I couldn't think of a better way to celebrate our birthday." (Tran in Hemetsberger 2009)

The ABC's director of international Murray Green said the move reflected the ABC's on-going commitment to serving people in those parts of Asia and the Pacific without press freedom. Green said the new services would use the "proven shortwave radio distribution as well as digital technologies to communicate to Burmese nationals and Burmese expatriates" (ABC 2009). Even before this announcement was made, the price of shortwave radios was reportedly increasing in Burma's Sittwe market. One blogger reported that many people had been buying shortwave radios to listen to news through foreign-based Burmese media stations (Sennitt, 2009).

More support for shortwave broadcasting emerged at the UNESCO World Press Freedom Day 2010 conference in Brisbane, Australia, in May 2010 when the former general manager of the Fiji Broadcasting Corporation Francis Herman said he believed shortwave had become increasingly important in Fiji in the wake of the censorship provisions imposed by the self-appointed government of Frank Bainimarama. Bainimarama famously shut down RA's FM transmitter after abrogating the nation's constitution and imposing strict censorship laws. In a speech to the Pacific Media Summit in Vanuatu in 2009 Scott highlighted a text message from inside Fiji sent to the ABC, which read: "We are trying to listen to you online but are having difficulty. Please keep broadcasting. You are all we have (Scott 2009).

ABC International's managing director Murray Green believes shortwave remained a valuable broadcasting tool for the highlands of Papua New Guinea, the outer islands of Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, Burma and in rural China. However, FM stations were considered more important in urban centres where the media regulations allowed foreign broadcasts or partnerships. Green suggested that Radio Australia should not be seen as a competitor to local media but as complementary.

It has been a very conscious piece of strategy in order to be in the same marketplace, in the same town square as other [radio] services. RA, in terms of covering the Pacific, would be the leader in that area, there are some other areas, NZI [New Zealand International] is a significant and very effective player, but they are providing news services that other stations pick up (Green 2009).

ABC International had a simple way of determining if shortwave was still viable in a country – staff walk into local shops to see if handsets could be bought. They were still on sale in PNG and were even given away at the Lae hospital in exchange for a donation of blood (ABC online).

When you go to a shop you will find on a shelf a radio that will have the three bands on it. Shortwave, medium and FM. So people can still find those in the shelf in PNG (Vetuna 2009).

ABC International also monitored how regional broadcasters were transmitting their material. Westland said Vanuatu had just installed a new shortwave transmitter, Solomon Islands was trying to fix its shortwave service, PNG was maintain its service while trying to build a sophisticated system of satellite distribution and FM services with the help of the Australian Government, and Radio Public Indonesia was still maintaining shortwave services into Sulawesi, Borneo and into some of the outer islands.

Many of them are turning it off or reducing their [shortwave] capacity. That doesn't hold true in Melanesian and eastern Indonesia. In Melanesia, in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, they are strengthening their shortwave capacities. It's cheap .... With shortwave I can have a transmitting studio, not far from a transmitting station, and I don't have to do anything else. If I am trying to cover a large area with a lot of islands I can do that. It may not be the greatest service in terms of fidelity, but it will cover those areas (Westland 2009).

ABC International was increasingly using FM transmitters to broadcast content in markets where there was relatively cheap access to FM receivers. The broadcaster recognised that the political and legal frameworks of a number of target countries had changed, allowing the instillation of FM relay stations.

Where previously international broadcasters would not have been ... now they have relaxed their controls and as a consequence we are able to make direct

communication with partners or we are able to set out own FM services and broadcast directly (Westland 2009).

However FM was not the saviour for all markets.

I have to have power, reliable power, I have to make sure the units still operate in adverse circumstances for electrical equipment. Saltwater buggers it up. Humid air buggers it up. And I have to have technical capacity on every island to make sure they operate. And I have to get a signal to them if I have my transmitter here, and that's the island on one side of the table, and my replay station is 1,000 kilometres away, I have to get the signal over there. That is either by satellite or phone lines. Satellite is expensive, telephone lines are unreliable. The cheap way to do it, for the broadcaster, is a single transmitter that tries to cover the lot (Westland 2009).

Regardless of the continued strength of shortwave in PNG, Ventura said he believed shortwave could be phased out within 10 to 15 years.

I don't think shortwave will be gone in 10 years, it will still be there, but we need to think about what will happen when it is phased out and the obvious shift is to mobile technology and the Internet (Vetuna 2009).

Ventura said the people of Papua New Guinea were not yet into the digital age, although the Tok Pisin service did have a digital presence and were active on social networking site Facebook.

Computers are expensive and few have access to it. Most people live in the rural areas, most places have no electricity and if you do have a computer, it will probably be somewhere where there is electricity. That's why we don't really worry too much about ... online (Vetuna 2009).

Tran believed that mobile phone technology would ultimately replace the need for shortwave transmissions.

Often mobile phones, not only are they cheap they are also rechargeable on solar cells so they don't rely on electricity. Mobile phones can now stretch beyond electricity. So that is an interesting development (Tran 2009).

Mobile future

Many within ABC International believed there was an extremely bright future of the mobile markets, even in those countries where there was so far little mobile penetration.

Even the ABC's managing director Mark Scott was pushing the role of mobiles in the future of broadcasting in the Pacific.

By investing more in transmission we can effectively be available free to air in every home with radio and television in the Pacific – and take advantage of the growth of content on mobile phones (Scott 2009).

Dempsey said the mobile market was problematic in some ways because it was a market-to-market prospect, dependent on what the telecommunications providers were doing in those countries, how much saturation there already was in the market, and if there was really an audience need for it. However, Tran saw the mobile market as a “jumping off” point for other content. The broadcaster keenly recognized the opportunities presented by the availability of mobile phones capable of being charged by solar panels in the sun, and for most handsets to have FM receivers.

Pretty much every mobile phone has an FM radio in it, so we are have a massive increase in the number of receivers out there and we know that there are number of people use those as their primary, or common source, of radio listening. That's using old technology but a new receiver (Westland 2009).

Green was blunt about mobile as a priority. “We need to be there, either in terms of English language learning, which is a high priority in terms of our content, or in terms of news and information.” Westland believed mobile technology was forcing a rethink of the way ABC International presented its content and how it presented that content.

There is an immediate need to rethink they way we present our content on the internet, so everything has to be scaled to phone screens. We also are looking at who are partners are going to be. Instead of using our traditional partners, which may well have been radio stations in the past, we may now look at telecommunications providers as being potential partners (Westland 2009).

ABC International was watching with interest as the biggest telecommunications provider across the Pacific, Digicel, was developing content streams. Digicel had started to produce content to broadcast on mobile phones.

They are putting 3G into Fiji and a couple of other places and they will give them broadband type access into through the phone network which is a revolution to what they have had (Westland 2009).

Even in Papua New Guinea, mobile technology is rapidly finding a place. Ventura believed mobile phones would quickly increase their importance in the PNG market, even though the national broadcaster the NBC was not yet capitalising on the technology:

With the arrival of Digicel, every mother and father in the village and grandfather and grandmother even [has a phone]. In the past that wasn't the case (Vetuna 2009).

Ventura said most of the mobile phones in PNG were basic, but they were cheap.

It's quite cheap to make a call. The lowest denominator is probably 10 kina, they even go down to 10 and 2 kina credit and they do that deliberately to suit the market there (Vetuna 2009).

However, Tran argued that mobile technology had a long way to go before it was a standalone broadcasting tool.

You cannot download a whole heap of deep analysis on a mobile screen but you can, on the mobile, promote the material that you have on other networks (Tran 2009).

Tran believed mobile technology was a promising medium for replacing shortwave because he argued that those in power could not interfere with it without disrupting the greater economy.

You can say that a government can shutdown a satellite channel, but that means interrupting business and commerce so the fact that it has immersed itself into the big communication channel that comes through a satellite and everywhere, that means that it is very hard for anyone to knock out (Tran 2009).

Green also saw the significant role the mobile phone could play in aiding democracy.

Digicel, prior to the election, introduced a mobile phone which didn't require a charge, you just put it in the sun, and it was a very reasonable price, so for the first time, people in villages who didn't have access, who were the silent constituency during these elections, were calling up (the radio station) and asking questions of candidates and sitting members. It revolutionised the process of democracy in terms of innovation (Green 2009).



The news and current affairs stories featured on the APNC website were strongly focused on repurposing original content produced by Radio Australia and Australia Network journalists. Unlike other news and current affairs sites where there was a quick turn around and updating of stories the APNC news site worked on the idea that people only accessed the website once or twice a day. The priority was to showcase APNC's content.

So that comes down to: when the correspondent has filed [a story] and the wires have filed [on the same story], we obviously work with the correspondent's version, but where we have an interview, we will add that into the APTN content, and where we have background from a previous story, that will be added in as well (Longmuir 2009).

Longmuir said one of the most pressing issues insured that the APNC site was not just rehashing wire copy and provided a genuine point of difference:

Everyone has the same wires service at the backend of it, and if you just published that, then there is no difference between your content and anyone else's there is nothing unique (Longmuir 2009).

One of the concerns of APNC online staff was the reliance on the wires or local newspapers in some parts of the Pacific.

In terms of having people on the ground simply to take pictures and film video, which is part of the website now, that is probably the major difficulty. It is difficult to get that material because there are not people on the ground in the particular country who can take those pictures (Longmuir 2009).

It took a while for most of the online editors to understand and recognize the value of working on the original ABC International copy.

You need to present a unique point of view, otherwise you may as well be posting the wires (stories provided by AFP, Reuters etc). More and more you see that on Google news: there are 237 stories, and they are all identical because they are all the Associated Press story just published on 237 sites (Longmuir 2009).

Some stories were more popular than others on the website, sometimes because of a lack of radio or television coverage in the featured countries.

We know that Sri Lankan stories have a huge online audience, but we don't necessarily prioritise them. There is no specialist Radio Australia broadcast into Sri Lanka so they may lower the priority on radio, but we know online there is a lot of interest in that (Longmuir 2009).

The APNC also recorded a strong interest in stories from Indonesia and Malaysia.

That doesn't mean that we can focus on those areas, it does mean that that story is going to have a lot more visitors than a story from China where there is a lot of news coming out of China anyway that gets covered by Xinhua and that obviously Chinese audiences in a large part are blocked from accessing some of those stories (Longmuir 2009).

There was recognition of the need to provide news and current affairs to the Pacific, even though the APNC was designed to broadcast to Asia and the Pacific in equal measure.

I think that we are aware of the need to publish Pacific stories and in some ways they are more important [than Asian stories] because there isn't another organisation doing that. So there might be less people overall come to the website, but as a proportion of the population in Fiji or PNG, or whatever it is actually a higher proportion getting their news through us (Longmuir 2009).

### **Online content**

The online editors were aware that the content that was produced for the website was re-purposed for a mobile service for people with iPhones and other similar types of technology. However the reformatting was done automatically by a computer program with no special editorial decisions being made in the production process. The provision of online news and current affairs by ABC International fitted with the desire of ABC International to attract leaders within each of the target markets: "Let's face it, the middle class of every market, from the poorest African nations to Korea has access to it [technology]" (Dempsey 2009).

Hemetsberger believed more needed to be done to tailor Internet content to audiences to make it more relevant to the individual markets.

If you are in Vanuatu and you are going to access the internet, we know that you are coming from Vanuatu, we can tell. There is nothing to stop us from changing

our page to make sure what is relevant for people in Vanuatu right up the front (Hemetsberger 2009).

Dempsey said ABC International had noted that the number of unique visitors to online news sites was dropping off, while there had been an increase in the use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter.

The formulas have changed ... if you think it is kind of cool now learning how to publish on line, well that's changing to, you look at those numbers rolling off (Dempsey 2009).

Dempsey said the ABC accepted that trust was a big influencer when it comes to the acceptance of news. Younger people, in particular, preferred to be provided with information through their social networks.

People prefer peer referral rather than big media providing these messages to them and so those models of journalism. The traditional models of journalism don't stack up these days like they used to (Dempsey 2009).

Dempsey believed technology was driving a fundamental change in the way news needed to be produced. Firstly, the original story was more important than the platform on which it was produced.

Any punter can go onto news aggregators, Google or whatever, despite what Murdoch might try and do in the future, they will try and access news that way. Google has become a massive news brand (Dempsey 2009).

Dempsey quoted US academic Jay Rosen who believed balance in journalism was no longer enough, and that journalists needed to take sides and make their position clear.

I think some of the stuff [Jay Rosen] was saying is interesting, I like that thing that balance is no good, just take a side and tell us which one so we know where you are coming from. Balance is not taking a side, and that is something that can't be trusted, that is an interesting turn of events (Dempsey 2009).

Dempsey also believed much more needed be done to harness the power of the various broadcast mediums.

We never got that good at using multi-media. There aren't great websites out there using video when it needs to be, text when it needs to be, audio or voice where it needs to be, where it makes sense, they are largely re-purposed content from another platform. There is a resource issue there (Dempsey 2009).

Dempsey believed the online site would ultimately be more effective if it could be better targeted to local communities.

For us, it's about getting content that is relevant by community, not by geography, and how we can take that content to them and then have those networks engage with that content out there and mix that in with what we broadcast and put on our websites and how we promote all the different channels that we are providing that content across (Dempsey 2009).

Most of the ABC International managers made much about the need for the organisation to be in conversation or in partnership with people in the region. As Tran said, it was no longer enough for Radio Australia to do what Menzies declared as "time for us to speak for ourselves".

We can keep talking to ourselves until the cows come home and no one will listen, they turn the other way. We have to make sure it sounds interesting to them so I think the role of Radio Australia should be to go beyond a simple story telling thing and provide opportunities for the two people to engage. (Tran 2009).

Mobile technology and SMS allowed greater interaction with the ABC International radio programs, but there was limited scope for feedback on the website. The tech talkback program TechStream was open for comment, but the news and current affairs sites were not. Dempsey said he regretted that the APNC site did not have user-generated content (UGC) but it was a resource intensive addition to any website. Tran suggested that there needed to be more ways for the audience to interact:

Somehow [we need] to make sure the people who are witnesses to history, to tell a story, have a chance to tell it, rather than us parachuting in, with the barest understanding of local issues, and trying to tell the world about it. It is simply not fair (Tran 2009).

Radio Australia had a role to play in developing media capacity: “We don’t just talk at them, we help them to talk at us” (Tran 2009). Hemetsberger said the nature of what ABC International was producing had to change in response to changes in technology:

We really need to be thinking about what we are producing, what is it about each market place. The old style business-to-consumer public broadcasting, where we [decided] that was what the audience wanted, and then bung it out there, I think those days are rapidly disappearing (Hemetsberger 2009).

### **Education of journalists**

Although all those interviewed were asked about priorities for the education of international journalists, the group did not have a clear view about what, if any, training was required for journalists planning to work in the Asia Pacific. Most suggested that journalists working in international broadcasting needed to have an education that stressed the need to be fair, balanced and accurate. Green argued the skills he wanted to see developed in young international journalists were scepticism and curiosity. He was not as interested in technology-based education.

Technology is just the tool. I am more interested in people’s perspectives and how they frame the world around them and how they see the world. Their ability to be able to sit in the places where other people sit, and in our situation, in cultures that may be quite different from their own cultural experience and we have some fantastic staff who have just started with their first job with us who exhibit all those characteristics, and it’s really exciting to see (Green 2009).

Westland argued that journalistic training needed to be married to wider social arts education.

You need to help people understand the world around them, and that is simply, you can. I don’t think there is any internationalising of the profession (Westland 2009).

There was acknowledgement in some quarters that young journalists are coming better prepared for the technical aspects of the job. Longmuir, who was often asked to train new employees and re-train older staff in the website software, said he believed younger staff were coming better prepared to the role.

There is obviously a level of education going into online journalism that wasn't there when I was doing it [seven years ago] .... I would hope [that new graduates] would have the realisation that you don't go work for a newspaper and that's it, you don't work for a radio station anymore. You are taking a picture for the website, you might be doing an audio interview which might be used as a little grab in a news bulletin, but then we post the whole interview on the website. We might only use your raw footage from the story because it can be there long before the 7pm bulletin. It is very clear that you don't just choose one path, you are in all of them, whether you like it or not (Longmuir 2009).

## **Conclusion**

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's International Division and the Asia Pacific News Centre appears to have a bright future ahead, if the ABC's managing director Mark Scott can summons the funds to proceed with the planned increase in bureaux and the resulting increase in original content production for the Asia Pacific region. The Internet has provided plenty of opportunities for ABC Internationals' target countries to access the wire services from the world's major economies, but what is missing are original stories from the smaller and poorer Asian and Pacific nations.

Although it may at times seem inefficient for the ABC to fund a variety of transmission platforms, there were many benefits for Australia's regional neighbours as was evidenced in Fiji.

When we are dealing with a situation where our website is blocked, our content is still available on shortwave radio, or when we dealing with our FM transmitters being taken down, we are still on television we are still online. It's because it is in so many venues now, the information is easier to get out and it's reaching more of an audience than it probably did before because the online content is seen everywhere, not just in the region (Longmuir 2009).

The most pressing need, however, was for a brand for ABC International's operations. This has previously been an almost fatal weakness of Radio Australia. It almost closed in 1987, because the Australian public simply did not know what Radio Australia was all about. The same could be said about ABC International and the APNC today. Tran put it clearly:

The [Australian] government, with certain political expediency can do what it likes [with Radio Australia] unlike the BBC World Service. Britons own that service, the government knows what it is about, they would not allow the government to fiddle with it. But here in Australia we still have got very educated ministers or politicians asking questions “why do we spend millions of dollars entertaining foreigners?” (Tran 2009).

Although the digital staff would likely see a new website as a superficial change, a redesigned website, complete with user generated activity, and fully employing mobile technology and social media could help in this branding exercise.

Staff at the ABC International clearly understand that their future relies on being clever and strategic about the markets that they target and it seems certain that if ABC International intends to continue targeting the same range of diverse markets that a one-size-fits-all approach will not work and some radical changes may need to be made. Just as the Vietnamese shortwave service was shut down and replaced with a fully online service, some decisions may need to be taken to service the needs of the region in the short term. It appears timely to think less about the platform on which the stories are aired, and more about the production of the original story and the best platform for delivery. Radio may need to be lost to some markets, for the development of more social media.

More work needs to be done on defining the audience, and the ABC’s responsibility towards them. It would be helpful for the ABC to publish its international audience share or in the words of Murray Green, the ABC could be seen to be “broadcasting to the clouds” and where is the value in that for the Australian public?

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