The gutting of Radio Australia

International

Nic Maclellan

22 July 2014

The ABC’s international broadcasting to the Pacific islands is being devastated by the latest round of staffing cuts, writes Nic Maclellan.

“Too few people in Australia understand how important Radio Australia has been in the Pacific,” says the ABC’s Sean Dorney, shown here after he was expelled from Fiji for his reporting of the crisis there in 2009. Dean Lewins/ AAP Image

We’re sitting on the grass in the village of Matangi on the island of Futuna. This is one of the more isolated communities in Vanuatu, a small group of houses on a small island at the southeastern extreme of the archipelago.

“We rely a lot on Radio Australia when there’s a cyclone coming,” says Miranda, a member of the island’s Community Disaster Committee. “We have no telephone on this side of the island and we often can’t hear Radio Vanuatu.”

As Australia debates budgets, debt and deficits, we rarely hear the views of communities affected by planned cuts. Whether it’s the size of the aid budget or the resourcing of the services of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, or ABC, our neighbours have little input into decisions that affect their lives.

The latest blow is the planned redundancy of eighty staff from ABC International following the Abbott government’s decision to take Australia Network television away from the ABC. Revoking the $250 million TV contract – with just ninety days’ notice – has had an impact well beyond television. Given the integration of TV, radio and online services within ABC International, the decision affects not only Australia Network but also the other services providing crucial information to the islands region.

ABC International has merged key functions of Radio Australia and Australia Network in recent years in expectation that its contract with the government would be honoured. With only $15 million of ABC funding to work with after the loss of $22.3 million this year from the contract, disentangling these services and activities will cause major problems. According to the ABC, it must find a way to operate “an converged media service with 60 per cent of the previous budget.” ABC management is still discussing the new service and its impact on staffing with affected employees, but it has revealed that “an approximate eighty staff will be made redundant.”

Last week, employees were given a fortnight to respond to forced redundancies and major cutbacks to services. “The new model has been designed to reach as much of our desired audience in the region as possible,” says an ABC spokesperson, “through a converged service based on radio, a limited television offering and digital means.” The broadcaster acknowledges that services will be cut, but says that it is “working very hard” to make sure that the impact on “audiences, partnerships and syndication is minimised as much as possible.”

Forced redundancies will have a disproportionate impact on Radio Australia services to the Pacific islands, however. “I can understand why my job has been eliminated,” observes veteran Pacific correspondent Sean Dorney, one of the casualties of the cuts. “I worked mostly for the Australia Network TV news service, which was funded under the Foreign Affairs contract. But I’m really feeling sorry for my colleagues at Radio Australia, who have become huge casualties of the reorganisation following this budget decision. Too few people in Australia...
understand how important Radio Australia has been in the Pacific.”

The government’s revocation of the Australia Network contract may be the original sin, but the gutting of Radio Australia suggests ABC management underestimates the importance of outreach into the Pacific. Whether it’s news, English language lessons, cyclone warnings or the latest cultural programs, there’s a significant audience for Radio Australia – especially in outlying islands and rural communities with limited access to the internet.

While there are alternative broadcast and internet services in the crowded Asian media market, the range of options in the small island states is much more limited (That’s not to say that the cuts to staffing in ABC International won’t seriously affect Asian programming. Three bureaus will close and the long running Asia-Pacific, Mornings and Asia Review are being axed.)

Many Pacific media organisations relay news and features from Radio Australia and Radio New Zealand International, providing a crucial window to the world that local media can’t hope to match. There are many excellent Pacific journalists working for private and government broadcasters across the region, but budgets are tight and resources for regional and global coverage hard to come by. Journalists in the region are often faced with government or military censorship, limited advertising, tough defamation laws and a complex cultural environment for investigative journalism; having stories broadcast by Australian or New Zealand media allows them to follow up issues that may otherwise be too hot to handle.

My concerns about the proposed changes to Radio Australia are based on thirty years of listening to Australian and New Zealand broadcasting in the islands. A decade ago, I also worked as a casual employee of Radio Australia, reporting for Pacific Beat – an experience that reaffirmed my belief in the importance of Australia’s capacity to broadcast radio, TV and internet into the region, and to carry voices from the Pacific into Australian debates.

The latest cuts fundamentally undermine this two-way process. Australia creates strategic problems for itself when key institutions – media, universities, non-government organisations and government departments – fail to allocate the resources needed to engage with a dynamic and complex region. The loss of experienced staff from ABC International will mean that the woeful coverage of the Pacific islands in the Australian media is further weakened. If the story doesn’t fit the paradigm of paradise (swaying palm trees, blue water, sandy beaches) or paradise lost (coup, corruption, climate change), voices from the islands rarely get a run.

According to current plans, the ABC will maintain one correspondent in Papua New Guinea and one in New Zealand, but lose its dedicated radio and TV correspondents for the Pacific islands. Pacific Beat will be retained, together with six hours of television broadcast into the islands region. “Radio Australia remains central to our broadcasting model and will continue to broadcast a 24/7 schedule,” says the ABC spokesperson. “The network will be delivered through deeper collaboration with ABC News and ABC Radio and through collaboration with SBS.”

But who will provide knowledgeable, accurate and timely content? The ABC’s domestic service has long relied on the expertise of reporters like Radio Australia’s Pacific correspondent Campbell Cooney, business reporter Jemima Garrett and Australia Network’s Sean Dorney. Dorney, who worked for many years in (and was deported from) Papua New Guinea, is one of Australia’s most experienced Pacific affairs reporters; in recent years, he has covered the region from Brisbane for Australia Network and ABC TV. Dorney believes that there’s a need for specialist reporting of a region that has vital importance for Australia: “I have often said that in the world outlook of most of the Australian media, Australia might as well be anchored somewhere between Ireland and North America rather than in the South Pacific.”

According to the proposed restructuring, Radio Australia’s English-language service is “not required,” and “English content will be sourced from ABC Radio and News in future.” The abolition of the English-language unit will be a major setback. In the past, Clement Paligaru, Heather Jarvis, Isabelle Genoux and other talented reporters have crafted radio series including Carving Out and Time to Talk (a twelve-part radio series and website on governance in the Pacific). Innovative content of this kind can only be produced by journalists with cultural understanding, personal relationships and a contact book developed through years of hard grind and travel across the region.
I doubt that the skills required for detailed coverage of the twenty-two countries in the islands region can easily be found in press gallery reporters who accompany Australian politicians on whirlwind visits to the islands. Add to this the fact that not one daily newspaper in Australia has a dedicated Pacific islands correspondent.

The cuts partly reflect a broader, but mistaken, view of technological change. A leaked summary of the federal government’s efficiency review of the ABC and SBS, which was headed by the former chief financial officer of Seven West Media, Peter Lewis, recommended shutting down Radio Australia’s shortwave broadcasting. “Noting shortwave is a largely superseded technology,” said the review, “discontinuing this service would release resources for other purposes.”

In reality, these broadcasts are a vital service for rural communities in neighbouring Melanesian nations like Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands. Streaming internet into the islands region is not sufficient for the ABC to meet its charter responsibilities: in spite of broadband advances in urban centres and the spread of digital phones, the vast majority of Pacific islanders still rely on radio for their information, and any loss of shortwave and satellite rebroadcasting will be sorely felt.

There will be “reduced original content requirements” and fewer positions in RA’s foreign language section, with the Chinese-language service reduced to three staff, Indonesian to three and just one broadcaster each for Vietnam, Burma and Cambodia. Staff at the Tok Pisin service, which provides a vital service for our closest neighbour, Papua New Guinea, will be reduced to just two. “Language services in Tok Pisin will be delivered through a mix of reduced original content coupled with translated ABC content,” says the current restructuring proposal.

The loss of “original content” for our northern neighbour comes at a time when foreign minister Julie Bishop has spoken of her “long love affair with Papua New Guinea” dating back to when she wrote to penpals there as a fourteen-year-old. Radio Australia’s PNG service has been broadcasting since Bishop was a lovelorn teenager; in past decades, Pearson Vetuna, Carolyn Tiriman, Kenya Kala and other Australian-based Radio Australia broadcasters were treated like rock stars when they visited their homeland. Proposals simply to translate ABC News into Tok Pisin hardly meet the ABC’s charter obligation for innovative broadcasting.

The future of Radio Australia’s French-language service “remains under consideration” even as the French dependencies of New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and Wallis and Futuna are building closer economic and political ties with Australia and the Pacific Islands Forum. New Caledonia is moving towards a referendum on self-determination in the next few years. Yet Australian audiences would be hard-pressed to find any coverage of last May’s elections, even though the incoming Congress will determine whether New Caledonia reaches a new political relationship with France before 2018. I was the only Australian journalist to travel to report on the elections from New Caledonia, and no newspapers in Australia published a report on the vote. (Ironically, Radio Australia was created during the second world war to complement Australia’s first diplomatic presence in the Asia-Pacific region: a consulate in New Caledonia established to support Gaullist efforts to overthrow the pro-Vichy governor.)

As I travelled around New Caledonia in May, a number of indigenous Kanaks mentioned items from Radio Australia’s French-language service that they’d heard or seen online. Australian broadcasting provides a crucial alternative in a media landscape dominated by French government media and a daily newspaper that campaigns against independence.

The ABC’s reporting of the region is not perfect, of course, and it’s not unknown for Pacific journalists to criticise the errors and cultural bias that are part and parcel of an under resourced organisation. But the loss of the Australia Network contract is part of a broader pattern that fatally damages Australian broadcasting to the islands region.

Even for a government that declares little love for the ABC, this short-sighted budget bushfire is yet another blow to Australia’s declining influence in the Pacific region. With cuts to the ABC, CSIRO, Bureau of Meteorology and other institutions working with Pacific partners, the Australian government is weakening regional initiatives to respond to poverty, development and the climate emergency. The merger of the Australian Agency for
International Development into the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and multibillion dollar cuts to the overseas aid budget over the next four years have already unbalanced the institutions that implement policy in the region.

And what about the villagers in Futuna? There will be an increased diet of ABC reporting of the floods in Queensland, but less timely information about the next cyclone bearing down on them. Surely we can do better than this.