

LOWY INSTITUTE
FOR INTERNATIONAL POLICY

**ABC International Conference
Melbourne**

1 December 2009

Issues in Australia's Relationships in the Asia Pacific

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Ladies and gentlemen

We are here today to discuss the work of ABC International, a strong and creative institution, on which almost everyone in this room is better qualified to speak than I am.

Rather than talk about ABC International, therefore, I want to talk to you about the political revolution that broadcasting has brought about, a revolution in which the ABC played not a small role.

The reason I want to talk to you about this is because by gaining some perspective on what's happened over the past 70-odd years, we can better come to terms with the massive challenges we face in the years ahead.

These are perhaps the greatest challenges we have ever faced as a nation, and in my view the ABC must play a pivotal role in our response to them as a nation.

I am not engaging in shallow hyperbole when I state that the broadcasting revolution has played a pivotal role in shaping the world in which we live.

The broadcasting revolution completed the internal construction of nations, making possible for the first time the continuous operation of a simultaneous national moral community.

Ken Inglis describes in his fine history of the ABC the Commission's early demonstrations of the possibilities of broadcasting – of bringing together musicians and singers in different parts of this continent in a single program.

It was through the ABC that Australians demonstrated electronically what John Hirst describes as their determination not to be cowed or shaped by distance – a determination that despite the vast distances that separate us left us with no significant regional variations in accent or manners and an easy willingness to travel extensively for jobs, leisure and adventure.

The broadcasting revolution changed relations among nations as profoundly as within them.

Broadcasting changed war, taking it from the toolbox of statecraft to the realm of moral absolutes.

The news media and government propaganda involved the newly wrought simultaneous national moral community in decisions and justifications about why, when and how wars were fought, and about why, when and how they should be ended.

And when the invention of nuclear weapons made hot wars between great powers unthinkable, broadcasting enlisted in the front line of the Cold War.

Ultimately what made the difference in the Cold War was not representational systems, economic models, intelligence coups or nuclear programs, but differing attitudes to the media – the ultimate expression of trust versus paranoia.

At the end of the day, it was one side's willingness to trust its citizens with privacy and rights, and to allow the operation of a free, critical and non-credulous media, which was prepared to hold both sides to account.

The other side could not contemplate other than a media that produced censored, dogmatic propaganda that ultimately reinforced its surveillance and restrictions of its citizens.

The Cold war ended 20 years ago, but its most enduring legacy is still with us – the enshrining of public opinion, via broadcast media, with a pivotal role in the shaping of international affairs.

The public as never before in history have become the authors, subjects and targets of foreign policy.

Media – both broadcast and narrowcast – play a crucial role in narrowing the information asymmetry between governments and publics.

No longer can governments rely on a massive information advantage to shape their case as before.

There is a huge demand-side hunger that has been unleashed here, and it is as relentless in its demands on the news media for information as it is in its demands on governments for transparency and honesty.

The fates of the Blair, Howard and Bush administrations will stand as a warning to future governments contemplating wars of choice against significant public disquiet.

Ultimately, it is rising public concern about global warming that has put governments and business on the spot; and it will be public frustration that will end the political and diplomatic gaming and push them towards establishing a working climate change regime.

Because this Cold War legacy extends past the privileged liberal democratic West and the societies that rejected communism 20 years ago.

Belief in the sovereignty of opinion, the catalytic role of choice, and the banishing of fatalism of background and circumstance is penetrating the most closed and traditional of societies.

It is spurred by talkback radio, reality TV and blogging, and has become a powerful democratic force for responsiveness and accountability in government to popular opinion.

Even more startling than the end of information asymmetry in our societies is the end of information asymmetry in closed and traditional societies.

But there's something else happening here also. We have reached the end of an era of great international information asymmetry.

This was an era in which a prosperous and all-successful West, through its powerful media organs, interpreted world affairs for everyone else on the planet.

Even when they were in disagreement, non-Western sources were still contesting Western narratives about the world.

The arrival of CCTV, Al Jazeera, and ZeeTV reflect a broader global power shift that is occurring, as societies' share of global wealth grow to reflect their share of world population.

These are more than marginal critical voices. They are backed by real resources and cultural self-confidence, are willing to borrow and experiment, and are riding a rising wave of consumer demand.

We are watching the arrival of hungry non-Western media players that base their appeal on their willingness to provide a different perspective.

This development is vastly complicating the new global dissensus – a growing cultural diversity of powerful players in world politics which is leading to a narrowing of the grounds of agreement on global affairs.

In recent years, Australian foreign policy makers have watched with dismay as years of quiet diplomatic craft have been undone by typhoons of negative media coverage.

The new media diversity injects a new emotionalism and passion into international affairs.

Many of our diplomats have expressed their bewilderment at the cynicism of the Indian media, which privately is willing to admit the nuances of the situation regarding Indian

students in Australia, but still goes to air or print with the most emotive, sensationalist copy.

We are less able to shape the story now than ever. The dynamism of the new media players lies in aligning with public emotions: fear and hope; condemnation and despair; respect and rage.

One respected French writer on international affairs has termed ours the age of the geopolitics of emotion.

In this new age, public diplomacy, and the role of broadcasting in public diplomacy, takes on a more serious function.

It is a role different from that of the old, targeted public diplomacy agendas: toppling dictators, attracting investment and tourists, and making us feel better about our standing in the world.

To reconceive the role of our public diplomacy, and of broadcasting within it, we need to think about the implications of the global power shift that is occurring, to which we have front-row seats.

We are currently watching two societies of a billion-plus people develop at an astonishing and sustained rate.

This is breaking all conventional understandings of economics or politics; it is best understood as the great realignment of population and wealth.

Globalisation and the cultural change it brings is eroding fast the great technology and development gulf that opened up 300 years ago between Western and non-Western societies.

Now, armed with knowledge and catalytic social attitude change, China and India are rapidly reclaiming a share of world GDP that matches their share of world population.

To contemplate the material implications of this is sobering in itself; but to contemplate the symbolic implications is doubly so.

There are important consequences of the power shift to be read into how different countries are interpreting it.

China and India view their own rise in cyclical terms; what keeps their billion-plus populations moving in roughly the same direction is a conviction that they are returning to an era of power and respect.

Europe views China's and India's rise in cultural terms; in their bursting energy Europe sees its own twilight.

America views China's and India's rise in ideological terms. In the surging success of the former it finds a challenge to the idea of America; in the slower progress of the latter it looks for the vindication of its own self-image.

The world of Islam views the great power shift in civilizational terms; on the one hand it welcomes the humbling of its own humiliator; on the other the success of non-Western states that are not Muslim seems to underpin its sense of loss of purpose.

Each of these perspectives on the great reordering now has its own voice.

More than any economic balance sheets, tank or missile inventories, or multilateral agendas, it is the broadcast media that will sing the new world into shape.

When we now turn on the radio, television or internet, we face a menu of different narratives of the world we are entering.

It is at this transition point that narratives carry such weight.

It is at times like these that a catch phrase sets reality's template – a broadly shared mental map that is given weight and substance by diplomacy, trade, alliances and institutions.

This is why this high stakes game of public diplomacy through broadcasting is being played out in our region.

We are slow to understand why closed, traditional and comfortable societies are investing so heavily in public diplomacy in our region.

The reason is primarily because we were the unwitting beneficiaries of the world that was sung into being at the end of the Second World War by the Anglophone powers.

At that time, we were dominant because we were largely uncontested.

Now we face powerful and persuasive challengers who have every intention to define the emerging global order in terms congenial to them.

It's time we woke up to this challenge.

Not in a King Canute like manner of holding back all change, because change is coming.

We are entering a more cosmopolitan world, where no single interpretation will be dominant.

That world has passed.

But we need to realise at the same time that there are values that we hold dear that need to be defended at the international level.

An open global trading and investment system, underpinned by strong property rights, as ultimately the most effective way of lifting welfare and distributing resources

The idea of the universality of open agreements and obligations, animated by the idea of non-discrimination.

The absolute conviction that the best principle on which to construct order is that of trust in citizens that allows them liberty of expression, movement, enterprise and association.

An emerging conception of consequences and stewardship that draws strict conditions around consumption and exploitation.

We as Australians are best placed to promote these values because we do not have the historical baggage or futurist dread of the Europeans or Americans.

We don't fear the emerging world; we as a society have already gone a long way towards accepting the great power shift.

In a very Australian way, we have accepted our inability to determine our international future, but in an optimistic, energetic way have rolled up our sleeves and are attempting to shape it.

We have great advantages – the hunger for English language is still powerful.

But our dependence on language is also a potential weakness – because it leads to a complacency about learning others' languages and cultures.

Ultimately we need our ABC on the front lines of promoting Australian interests and values in the emerging global order.

Broadcasting must be at the core of our new public diplomacy, and the ABC is uniquely positioned to provide this.

But if we need the ABC to perform, it needs to be properly resourced.

By any measure, the figures on our international broadcasting aren't pretty.

Australia currently spends \$35 million a year on international broadcasting.

On this tiny budget, Australia Network broadcasts around the clock to 44 countries across Asia and the Pacific, reaching 22 million homes, or 7 million viewers per month.

But Australia Network's success can't hide the inadequacy of its funding. Compare its \$19 million budget with those of the BBC at \$525 million; Radio Netherlands at \$100 million; Deutsche Welle at \$482 million; TV Monde at \$276 million, and NHK World at \$212 million.

Even viewed on a per capita basis, Australia's international broadcasting budget is pathetic. We spend just \$1.66 per Australian on international broadcasting, compared with \$8.60 for every Briton; \$6 for every Dutch person; \$5.80 for each German; \$4.30 for each French person; and \$1.70 for each Japanese.

These figures show how seriously Australian governments take public diplomacy and international broadcasting.

Australia's miserly approach to international broadcasting is consistent with its underresourcing of its diplomacy in general, as detailed by the Lowy Institute's Blue Ribbon Panel Report, "Australia's Diplomatic Deficit" earlier this year.

Indeed, Australia's lag in public diplomacy is getting bigger by the year.

Our diplomacy needs to be better resourced across the board, but there is a strong case for arguing that public diplomacy, and international broadcasting in particular, is in most urgent need of a funding boost.

Arguably, getting our public diplomacy right is an even greater challenge for Australia, because of how important to our future the countries of our region are, and because their histories, cultures and languages are so different from ours.

Not only is the international arena changing rapidly, but the means of dealing with it are also changing.

We need to accept that we live in the age of the democratization of international affairs.

The public is no longer an untutored mass which finds out about the outcomes of intricate diplomatic manoeuvre long after the fact.

The public is now a permanently engaged field of forces in international affairs, whose moods, attitudes and expectations shape the parameters of what professional diplomats can achieve.

There can be no more fundamental or important target for Australia's influence than the publics in the region that most matters to us – Asia and the Pacific.

Our message must be clear and well-honed, talking directly to people about Australia as a society; the principles for which it stands and the regional and global orders it sees as just and sustainable.

Through international broadcasting, Australia's public diplomacy can reach more people, around the clock, than ever before.

And there are further realms of possibility in the fields of the new media, where small increments of funding can be leveraged into impressive leaps in reach and influence.

There is a vast and still largely untapped hunger in our region, for knowledge and broader perspectives, that can be catered to through broadcasting and the internet.

But these opportunities won't last forever.

There are powerful and well-resourced public broadcasters with a growing interest in our region.

And little wonder – there is now far more energy in this region than in the rest of the world. Few would doubt that this region will be the driving force in shaping the future international order.

So, in celebrating ABC International's achievements, we need also to admit that in this crucial field of our international affairs, we are being outspent by other countries which have clearly grasped the centrality of public diplomacy better than we have.

This is a true call to arms.

I hope that there are plenty of fellow believers, here and more broadly.