

We need to broadcast to the world, not whisper

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As the Cold War was ending in the late 1980s and early '90s, Western nations, confident of a lasting peace, began to neglect the tools that had sustained them in the ideological war against communism. In the United States, institutions of public diplomacy and strategic communications were disbanded, and foreign service hiring frozen, in what the US Defence Secretary, Robert Gates, called a "gutting" of the US's ability to engage, assist and communicate with the world. Other countries blindly tagged along.

Then came September 11. The US, as with the rest of the West, was unprepared. Its international broadcasters such as the Voice of America, Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe, which had performed vital roles in the Cold War, were losing credibility, hobbled from years of government cost-cutting. The West's voice to the world had gone quiet, precisely at the time when the information revolution was giving vocal power to a whole generation of non-state actors: individuals, non-government organisations, extremists, terrorist groups. Anaesthetised in the US, public diplomacy was on steroids elsewhere.

The first decade of the 21st century was spent rebuilding those tools of communication. The BBC World Service expanded aggressively with foreign language TV into the Middle East. Voice of America regrouped. Powerful, well-backed new operators such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya emerged. China stepped into the fray, reportedly investing more than \$US6 billion on its international broadcasting alone, through CCTV and international radio.

But there are signs in the West that complacency is returning. There are serious concerns that inattention to the basic tools of public diplomacy will find it unprepared for whatever the developing world has in store.

Right after the BBC World Service was forced to announce deep cuts to its budget affecting even its Arabic-language services, Egypt and Tunisia evicted their presidents. The impact is reverberating around the Middle East. The BBC and Voice of America have announced their Chinese language services will be cancelled due to budget pressures. The Republican-led US House of Representatives just voted \$60 billion in budget cuts. The chairman of appropriations dubbed them the "largest reduction in non-security discretionary spending in the history of the nation".

Even Gates argues that America cannot simply "kill or capture its way to victory" and that its non-security efforts in persuading and inspiring foreign citizens were pivotal in the outcome of the Cold War.

They are just as important now. The events of the past few weeks in the Middle East have surely reinforced the power of the media (new and old) to inspire, engage and propel change.

Where is Australia in all of this? A Western nation in Asia, we are surrounded by billions of people living in vastly different socio-economic conditions, with different religions and political systems. As we pumped an extra \$3 billion into regional aid spending over the next five years, we also have sliced our public diplomacy budget in half and we have just put to tender our international TV broadcasting service on a feeble \$23 million-a-year budget, locked in at that level for 10 years. "Priority countries" identified in the tender do not even include Papua New Guinea, the Solomons and the rest of the Pacific, where we direct a huge proportion of our aid and where maintaining stability is vital to our interests.

Australia's international broadcasters are potent tools but have weathered periods of government hostility or neglect. Radio Australia, a much-needed independent source of news in the region since 1939, was threatened with closure in the mid-1990s and its budgets halved. Yet in 1999 and 2000, Radio Australia's website was hit 2 million times by East

Timorese and Indonesians seeking news on the referendum. In 1996, Papua New Guinea's then prime minister Julius Chan offered to return \$1 million in aid to keep the service open to his country.

Despite this distinguished history, it looks as if Australia's international broadcasters are about to weather another storm, if the Australian government takes its cue from the US and Britain, cutting its public diplomacy programs and with them, Australia's voice to the region. History warns that letting everyone else speak louder than you is a perilous course.

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