

A network to sell Australia

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In what could only be described as a complete pasting, Professor Judith Sloan has called for the axing of Australia's international television broadcaster, the Australia Network, dubbing it 'repetitive, pointless tosh'.

Scrapping the service would save taxpayers millions of dollars, Sloan argues, largely based on what she saw of the service during a recent trip around Asia.

In the rapid-fire commentary around the government decision to kill the tender process for the network (about which we have had much to say here at the Lowy Institute) there have been others who, rather more gently, urged a review of the ABC's approach to the Australia Network. The AFR's Tony Walker argued for a "professional and effective" service, with "quality programming with an emphasis on news and current affairs...The ABC needs some of its best reporters, editors and anchors to be involved. A rebranded ABC Australia cannot serve as a dumping ground for the second-rate".

The Australia Network's content mix is obviously important, and there may well be scope for an independent review looking at whether programming meets audience needs and the service's objectives. That review would no doubt involve a methodical and scientific survey of content, audience perceptions and satisfaction, which would remove the temptation to make snap decisions based on random anecdotal evidence.

However, Sloan's conclusion that "any notion that a contribution is being made to the soft diplomatic effort of Australia is simply laughable" is worth looking at.

Firstly, the Australia Network represents almost the entire government expenditure on public diplomacy, with most other platforms cut over the last few years as Australia's foreign affairs infrastructure has been whittled away. Apart from DFAT's website and the tightly-constrained activities at diplomatic posts, the Australia Network is Australia's so-called 'soft diplomacy'. Axing it would be drastic, and would cut off one of Australia's principal means of projecting its image, strengths and values to the world.

It would also deprive the region of a valuable source of independent news and current affairs, with ABC's corps of correspondents in Asia (26 journalists in five Asian bureaux and 55 in the Asia Pacific News Centre) far outstripping that of the BBC, CNN, Sky and Al Jazeera.

Given the erratic government treatment of both Radio Australia and Australia Network over their chequered histories, it is miraculous they have any audiences at all. But they do, and they are significant: Australia Network reaches over 31 million and ranks higher than Al Jazeera English and Korea's Arirang in a major nine-city survey across Asia. It remains either the most watched or second-most watched international broadcaster in Pacific Island markets.

In 2010, Annmaree O'Keeffe and I reviewed* the operations of ten prominent international broadcasters, including the BBC World Service, Al Jazeera, China's CCTV and China Radio International, Voice of America, Germany's Deutsche Welle and the new France 24. In stark contrast to Australia's erratic support for Radio Australia and the Australia Network over the last two decades, we found that, globally, government-funded international broadcasting had expanded rapidly, with many broadcasters launching into television for the first time. We also found a veritable mushrooming of 24-hour news services.

So while we puttered along here in Australia, the rest of the world was treating international broadcasting very seriously indeed. In 2007, the BBC World Service got a boost of £70 million over three years (on its annual budget of around £270 million) to launch TV services in Arabic and Persian. France 24 was launched with a budget of around €100 million. China is reputedly pouring over US\$6 billion into its international broadcasting, and Al Jazeera has been expanding aggressively since it launched in 1996, its budgets reputedly in excess of US\$300 million annually.

Against that, Australia's \$23 million a year is trifling. Even on a per capita basis, Australia spends far less than any of the other services we reviewed.

Yes, there has been something of a global contraction over the last two years, with broadcasters wearing the impact of global financial crisis as public service budgets get slashed. But for Professor Sloan to say that the BBC World Service's slimming down was "an acknowledgment of the changed context in which the service operates" is something of a non-sequitur. The BBC cuts came at a time when the entire public service budget was cut by £40 billion per annum over four years, with a two-year freeze on public service wages. And this came only after a period of intense investment and consistent government support over a century of British international broadcasting.

Does it work? Is the serious investment in all this broadcasting paying off? The BBC thinks so: in a 2010 survey on attitudes to the service in Kenya, Egypt, Pakistan and Turkey (hardly easy markets), 80 per cent of respondents said the BBC made them think more positively about the UK, far more than any other British institution they were asked to rate, such as the British Council, the UK Government, UK foreign aid, the Premier League and UK pop culture.

Properly supported, funded and structured, international broadcasting can and does work for Australia. AN's stablemate, Radio Australia, has been a mainstay in Australian communication to the region for over 70 years, so much so that Sir Julius Chan offered to return \$1 million in aid to keep the service open to Papua New Guinea when the Australian Government threatened to axe it in 1996. RA's bilingual website service received millions of hits in East Timor in the lead-up to the independence referendum in 1999.

Australia is a prosperous nation whose closest neighbours face vastly different socio-economic conditions, with different religions and political systems. We are spending almost \$5 billion in aid each year to help them address their challenges. Yet we have starved our diplomatic network and hobbled our public diplomacy. Now is not the time to axe our primary means of communication with our region.

* Disclosure: the review was commissioned by the ABC.

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