

Turn up the volume on TV to the region

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Since early 2011 when the Australian government put out to tender the contract to run Australia's international television channel, the Australia Network, there has been a frenzy of commentary, politicking, muckraking and mudslinging from every direction.

There is no doubt the tendering was botched by government almost from the moment that then foreign minister Kevin Rudd decided to stir the pot and invite commercial TV operators into the fray. The Auditor-General's report early this month on the government's conduct of the tendering was damning, citing confusion, perceived conflicts of interest, inefficiency and waste, and concluding that the whole mess cast the government in a poor light.

There are new twists in the drama now, with a salvo fired by economist Judith Sloan calling the Australia Network "tosh" and demanding it be axed to save money. The latest drum is that the very existence of the network is in doubt — its long-term arrangements "under consideration by government" barely months after the government awarded the contract to the ABC permanently.

Can we all just sit down and take a deep breath?

Questions about content on the Australia Network were inevitable, particularly as Sky was the other contender for the contract. Sky News' forays into China were seen by some as an irresistible carrot for the government in its bid to gain greater traction in Asia for the network. There have been others, apart from Sloan, who with varying degrees of insistence have urged a review of the ABC's approach to the network. An independent review of the network's content is a good idea. The direction of the network could then be judged on the basis of objective, statistically sound evidence, rather than making snap decisions based on random anecdotes.

However, the idea that Australia can do away with the Australia Network altogether is much more dangerous. Calls like Professor Sloan's are often based on some flawed assumptions: the internet and social media reach everyone and solve everything; no one uses TV any more; no one sees or likes the Australia Network - it's hugely expensive and a waste of taxpayers' funds; the Australia Network's just for a few expats and what's the point of that?

Yes, mobile phones are ubiquitous and smartphone use is high (ranging from 35 per cent in Hong Kong to 62 per cent in Singapore). But in many places in our near neighbourhood, such as Papua New Guinea and East Timor, internet connections are grindingly slow. Yet more than four in five homes in Asia have a TV and more than half subscribe to cable or satellite TV.

The Australia Network scores pretty well in audience surveys, considering its paltry budgets. Given the erratic government treatment of the network over its chequered history, it is a miracle it has any audience at all, yet with a reach of more than 31 million it ranks higher than al-Jazeera English and Korea's Arirang in a nine-city survey across Asia. It remains either the most-watched or second-most-watched international broadcaster in Pacific Island markets.

Axing the network would mean cutting a leg off Australia's diplomacy to the region. Not only is it one of Australia's principal vehicles for communicating its image, culture, strengths and values to the world, it's also a valuable (and highly valued) source of independent news and current affairs for the region, with the ABC's corps of correspondents in Asia (26 journalists in five Asian bureaus and 55 in the Asia Pacific News Centre) far outstripping that of the BBC, CNN, Sky and al-Jazeera.

In stark contrast to Australia's fitful government support for Radio Australia and the Australia Network over the past two decades, globally, government-funded international broadcasting has expanded rapidly. China has ploughed billions into its international broadcasters CCTV and Xinhua and it broadcasts radio in more than 60 languages. We sputter along here in Australia while the rest of the world treats international broadcasting seriously.

Against other Western nations' investments in broadcasting, Australia's \$23 million a year is trifling — even on a per capita basis, our \$1 per Australian per annum is minuscule.

We could do a good job with this if we tried. The BBC, well supported and funded by government, is one of Britain's greatest exports and ambassadors to the world: one of its recent surveys in Africa and the Middle East found the BBC did more for Britain's reputation than its foreign aid, the Premier League and British pop culture.

International broadcasting can and does work for Australia, as long as it's properly supported, funded and structured. Radio Australia, the stablemate of the Australia Network, has been a mainstay in Australian communication to the region for more than 70 years.

Australia is a prosperous nation surrounded by populous neighbours facing vastly different socio-economic conditions, with different religions and political systems — and we spend billions in aid each year trying to help them. If we're serious about the Asian century, we need to amplify our voice to the region, not silence it.

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