COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE

Australia's relationships with the Pacific

THURSDAY, 10 SEPTEMBER 2020

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Members in attendance: Senator Sheldon and Mr Gorman, Mr Hill, Mr Sharma.

Terms of Reference for the Inquiry:
To inquire into and report on:

The Committee shall examine the conditions necessary to strengthen Australia's relationships with the countries of the Pacific region to meet current and emerging opportunities and risks facing the region.

The Committee shall have particular regard to:

1. The implementation of Australia's Pacific Step-up as a whole-of-government effort to deepen and coordinate Australia's Pacific initiatives;

2. Exploring prospects to strengthen and broaden Australian engagement in the Pacific Step-up, through non-government and community-based linkages, and leveraging interest groups such as the Pacific diaspora;

3. Measures to ensure Step-up initiatives reflect the priority needs of the governments and people of Pacific island countries.
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Evidence was taken via teleconference—

Subcommittee met at 11:00

CHAIR (Mr Sharma): I now declare open this public hearing of the Foreign Affairs and Trade Subcommittee of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade for the inquiry into strengthening Australia's relationships with countries in the Pacific region. Today the subcommittee will hear from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, or the ABC, the Australia Asia Pacific Media Initiative and Mr Graeme Dobell on strengthening Australia's relationships in the Pacific region. In accordance with the subcommittee's resolution at the start of this parliament, this hearing will be audio broadcast on the parliament's website and the proof and official transcripts of proceedings will be published on the parliament's website. I wish to advise the witnesses that, in giving evidence to the subcommittee, you are protected by parliamentary privilege.

I also remind you of the obligation not to give false or misleading evidence, which may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. These are public proceedings, although the subcommittee may agree to a request to have evidence heard in camera or may determine that certain evidence should be heard in camera. A witness may object to answering a question and, if so, the witness should state the grounds upon which the objection is taken and the subcommittee will determine whether it will insist on an answer, having regard to the ground which is claimed and the boundaries of parliamentary procedure.

I now welcome representatives from the ABC, who will appear together at today's public hearing. Mr Hua and Ms Elsom, would you like to make a brief opening statement before we proceed to discussion?

Mr Hua: Yes. Thank you, Chair. Too few people are aware of the work that ABC International continues to do, so, if I may, I would like to briefly reiterate the central ideas of the ABC's submission and then draw the committee's attention to some of the recent work that the ABC has done in the region. One of the ABC's functions is to provide media services to countries overseas, and that encourages an understanding and an appreciation of Australia, including its policies, attitudes to world affairs and way of life. This is the work that the corporation has done for more than 80 years and it's embedded in the ABC's charter. We do this in the Pacific using radio, television and online and digital services and, through our International Development arm, the corporation helps to train journalists and other media professionals in the Pacific to promote democratic values and public interest journalism. Each month, the ABC reaches a unique overseas audience of about 11 million on our own platforms—that's television, radio and digital services—and in the Pacific we reach about 830,000 each month. This equates to about seven per cent of the total population in the Pacific. On Radio Australia, there are over 400,000 listeners each month in the Pacific and Timor Leste, and there are over 360,000 viewers of the television service. In 2019, we had 275,000 downloads from the Pacific of ABC podcasts. That's all on platform. Off platform, in 2019 there were 1.6 million views of ABC content on YouTube, and that's a figure that's grown by 177 per cent so far this year.

The ABC's international activities make an important contribution to strengthening Australia's relationships with its Pacific neighbours. They promote an understanding between our nations; they encourage receptiveness to Australian ideas and ways of thinking; and they help to foster trust. Not only does the ABC engage in relationship-building with Pacific audiences and organisations, but its international media services lay foundations that can help in relationship-building between Australia and its neighbours, such as through trade, tourism, and cultural exchanges. Some of our programs on Radio Australia include Pacific Beat, which continues to deliver agenda-setting journalism. Wantok is a daily Tok Pisin program broadcast and syndicated to audiences. Island Music and the Pacific Break competition have engaged people through music, and we've recently started up Pacific Playtime, which is a program especially for young Pacific ears. On ABC Australia TV we continue to acquire programs from commercial networks and independent producers and broadcast those alongside our own. Some of the acquisitions include Pacific Island Food Revolution, We are Tuvalu and Blackbird. Last month we broadcast Pacific Unite, which was a concert organised by the United Nations to help communities during the pandemic. Last year as well Q&A was hosted out of Suva, and this showcased the importance of the Australia-Pacific relationship to Australian and Pacific audiences. It was made in collaboration with the FBC, the Fijian Broadcasting Corporation, and it was a valuable experience for both of our teams to learn from each other. I'm pleased to say that later this year, enabled by DFAT funding, we will be delivering new Pacific focused sports programming across radio, TV and online. These programs will leverage Pacific talent in Australia and in the region to tell stories, build on the mutuality of our experiences and provide positive representation. They will also use sport as a lens to discuss the important issues around the Pacific.
The ABC’s response to the COVID-19 crisis provides a case study of the kind of contribution that we are able to make. The corporation was able to quickly deliver accurate, timely information to Pacific audiences to support partner media organisations in the region to do the same. On Sunday this week, NBC TV in Papua New Guinea aired the first episode of Road to Recovery, which is a weekly show highlighting different aspects of COVID-19 reaction and recovery across PNG’s various provinces. The ABC international development team has been supporting NBC to produce these. The program was also streamed on Facebook, and I’m pleased to say that feedback has been positive. The ABC ID team is also providing similar media mentoring and content support through FM 100 and One TV, and it has also worked with the Department of Health in PNG on the COVID public service announcements across all forms of media. A cartoon about social distancing is currently on the main billboard in Port Moresby. Other areas where we’re working with Pacific media to support the COVID-19 response include combating misinformation and fake news, media resilience and journalists’ safety and wellbeing. This work is being funded by Australian aid through DFAT.

In closing these opening remarks, it’s important to note that the ABC is not alone in our international mission. All major and most middle powers fund international media services as a form of public diplomacy. This extends their soft power. A number of other nations are investing heavily in media services targeting Pacific nations as a means of extending their influence in the region. The ABC’s international services, with their multiple touchpoints, trusted reputation built on decades-long relationships and a spirit of innovation, are a national asset and should be supported and utilised in the fullest to support and strengthen Australia’s relationships with our neighbours, friends and family in the Pacific. My colleague and I are happy to take questions.

CHAIR: Thank you for that opening statement and for the very thoughtful submission that you made to the inquiry. I have a few questions for the ABC, and I think my colleague Julian Hill may have some more questions after that. They were interesting figures that you had about the reach and the viewership and the audience, particularly in the Pacific, to ABC content. What are you seeing in terms of trend lines in terms of what the audience is most interested in and the content that they’re consuming the most? Is there anything that you found there that’s particularly surprising or at odds with the traditional pattern?

Mr Hua: It’s broad. I think it’s important to remember that we often use the term Pacific to encapsulate a very, very large geographical region. But as we would know on the call, there are a there is an incredible amount of diversity within the Pacific. Papua New Guinea, of course, is the most linguistically diverse country in the whole world, with 800 languages. Micronesia, Polynesia and Melanesia have very different cultures, and even within what are defined as countries there are very different identities. But broad trends are around news and information, entertainment and children’s programming. It is broad. By way of trends, as well, we are certainly seeing increases in digital consumption. This is largely to do with changing audience behaviours, the fact that the Pacific is very young and that Australia is helping to support infrastructure in the Pacific to make availability of digital engagement more accessible.

What I would say, though—and this is the challenge for any media organisation, especially those that have multiple touchpoints—is that we have to be conscious that audiences are very fragmented and that there’s still a lot of radio listening and there is a lot of television viewing. As an organisation that endeavours to have as much traction as possible with the diverse audiences, it poses a challenge for the ABC to be able to service all of those touch points.

CHAIR: Thank you, that's interesting. That's very useful. I think in your opening statement you touched on the use of Australia’s own Pacific diaspora. It’s something that's been a recurrent theme throughout this inquiry, I think a general sense that we don't harness or utilise our diasporas as well as we can. How much success has the ABC had in harnessing Pacific people to talk to a Pacific audience, using the diaspora we have here in Australia to help produce content for consumption in the region?

Mr Hua: I'd like to draw attention to a program that I've just mentioned, one that's coming up, which is the sports programming. This is a radio program that is about to come online shortly. It's hosted by Fijian Australians or Australians of Fijian heritage. They're comedians. They've got a significant digital following. The principle behind leveraging diaspora communities is that we want to be inclusive. We want to change the voice around what has traditionally been broadcast activities, which is Australia speaking to the Pacific. This is about building a mutuality, as I've spoken about. This talent comes from the Pacific. They've got deep familial and personal relationships with the Pacific. When they produce content and share stories, it comes with an imprimatur that is stronger than if the ABC or any organisation were to simply endeavour to speak to audiences. We're seeking to produce more content that includes Pacific voices and is produced in a way which allows for shareability across borders.
Ms Elsom: I just want to add to that some examples of work that we've done with Pacific media. Currently, we have a digital series called Stay Strong Pacific, which is all about building resilience and celebrating the Pacific during the time of COVID-19. That program has worked with the Pacific diaspora in Australia and New Zealand, as well as working with media to help produce that content. The stories are very much around diaspora, as well as those living in the Pacific, and how they are coping and adapting in this time. What we've found with that program is that it not only showcases, highlights and builds the capacity of the media that are helping produce that content, but it also showcases the capacity of Pacific diaspora living in Australia and their contributions to Australia and the broader region. That's an important component of highlighting the value and the contribution that diaspora are making.

Mr Hua: I mentioned a news program that's coming online, but I would also mention that Pacific Beat has been broadcasting for a very long time. The host of that program has Pacific heritage. There is also Wantok, which is in Tok Pisin and is fronted by a Pacific Islander in Australia.

CHAIR: Understood, thank you. You mentioned in your submission that your budget is around $11 million. That's about one per cent of the ABC's overall annual budget?

Mr Hua: Yes.

CHAIR: Has there been a trendline to that internal allocation over the last few years? Has the $11 million been a roughly constant figure, or has it moved up or down in recent years?

Mr Hua: Over the last few years it has been sitting at $11 million dollars; however, going back to about 2014, prior to the Australia Network cuts, the figure for international services was closer to $35 million.

CHAIR: I see. This might not really be in your remit, but another general theme that the inquiry has heard about is the limited understanding, awareness and exposure of the Australian audience to what goes on in our near neighbourhood, which is obviously about Pacific content on Australian screens and radio and things like that. Is that part of your remit as well, or are you focused outwards rather than on Pacific reporting networks and how much Pacific content, for want of a better term, is reaching Australian audiences?

Mr Hua: It is part of our remit, and we see that as an important part of our role in helping to explain to Australian audiences the importance of the region and why the Australian government has a step-up policy and why there is so much significant investment going on in the Pacific. There are some examples of how that's happening. I've mentioned Q+A. That wasn't an inexpensive task, taking that program overseas, and we were very pleased to have the Minister for International Development and the Pacific on that panel, giving us a forum to front not only a Pacific audience but also a domestic audience to explain the policies.

In addition to that, programs like Pacific Beat are available on the ABC Listen app, exposing that program to a domestic audience as well. With the new programs, such as the sports programs that I've just mentioned, on radio and on television, we are endeavouring to broadcast those domestically too.

CHAIR: Thank you so much, Mr Hua.

Mr Hill: Thank you for your excellent submission and your introductory remarks. I agree it's not widely known or well understood in the community, but it's incredibly important work that you do and it's great to hear about it firsthand. I was pretty shocked, when I read your submission, to see the extent to which your funding has fallen. You mentioned that figure of $11 million dollars before. Can I clarify two things. When you say it's been at $11 million for the last few years, is that indexed, or do you mean in dollar terms it's sat at $11 million dollars?

Mr Hua: I'll have to take that on notice, but in terms of the period of time that I've been managing the budget it has been sitting at that mark, so for the last 2½ years.

Mr Hill: In real terms there's been no CPI growth in your budget, so in effect that's a cut in real terms.

Mr Hua: I'll have to take that on notice.

Mr Hill: Has there been any growth in your budget?

Mr Hua: There has been growth in the budget, but only insofar as we have been able—and we're very grateful for this—to secure some grant money from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade for some of the programs, including the two that I've just mentioned.

Mr Hill: Table 1 in your submission ranks comparisons with other international broadcasting services. You've got the People's Republic of China sitting at about $3.4 billion, and you mentioned in the table that China has announced another $9 billion they're investing. We're sitting almost at the bottom of the world's league table you've put there, at $11 million. Does that cover all of our activities globally, or is that just for the Pacific?
Mr Hua: It covers all of our international activities. What I've just described to you are programs that go on ABC Australia and Radio Australia. Radio Australia used to have a larger footprint than what it does right now. Its focus right now is on Pacific audiences, and this is because audience consumption patterns have changed as well. The television service that I've mentioned, and that is paid for out of the $11 million, covers all 40 territories that we broadcast into, and so—sorry?

Mr HILL: I just think that's astounding—the amount that you do with such a small amount of money is incredible. And there's no doubt that you do well with what you've got. You mentioned that the $11 million has been roughly constant. If you could take that on notice and get us actual cash flows, that would be helpful. And if you could break that down to show us the funding source of what's come from the ABC's core budget, which we know has been under pressure and cut year-on-year, and if you could also then line item what you're getting in the way of grants, as you mentioned, from other agencies, that would be helpful. Since the cuts in 2013-14, what has the ABC been doing less of in the Pacific as a result of those budget cuts and the closure of the Australia Network?

Mr Hua: Sadly, we've been producing less content. So, while we maintain a broadcast footprint and a distribution footprint, what we've reduced is the amount of bespoke programming that is available to audiences and produced for audiences. A number of programs have been cut. In the Pacific specifically, we did have a French service that went into the French Pacific. That service no longer exists.

We've had to reduce headcount across the board. As a result, to give you an idea, in terms of the daily 24-hour schedule for Radio Australia, four to five hours of that schedule is bespoke programming. The rest of it is curated from the ABC's domestic programs.

Mr HILL: Right—

Mr Hua: Similarly, on television—if I may finish—

Mr HILL: Sure.

Mr Hua: as to the television footprint, across all territories and a very significant time zone, all the way from Samoa to India in the west, we send out one signal. So, since the Australia Network cuts, our ability to localise content has been very significantly reduced, which means that our programmers—and I'm very grateful for their efforts—have a very hard task of when to schedule in programs, given the seven-hour time difference.

Mr HILL: The $11 million you mentioned, with which you do so much, comes from the ABC's core budget. But, prior to that, you used to be funded by DFAT—the international functions. Is that correct, or did I get that wrong?

Mr Hua: No, that's correct. We had a 10-year contract with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade for the provision of the Australia Network services. That contract was ended in 2014.

Mr HILL: It just seems so peculiar, given its criticality to Australia's safety and security and the improvement to soft power, as you and other submitters have outlined, that we would see these cuts and then the squeezing of the funding of such an important international function back on to the poor old ABC's diminishing budget. But that's an issue we can't talk about, I suppose. Your opening statement mentioned that other countries are investing to increase their influence in the region. Does the ABC perceive that Australia's influence is at risk of being displaced or diminished as a result of these competitors investing more?

Mr Hua: It's difficult to be able to compare the performance of the ABC services with others. There are no international benchmarks. The numbers that I quoted for you come from substantial and pretty extensive research that's done in the Pacific. Even in the Pacific, especially with broadcast activities, it's impossible to measure one source against another. But where there has been some research done—and I will throw to my colleague to share some research that's just been released—it does show that Radio Australia and the ABC Television service performing favourably against some of our competitors. Jo, do you want to jump in there?

Mr HILL: Could you be relatively brief, as I want to flip to short wave.

Ms Elsom: No problem. I should also say that the ABC's international development work is separately funded from the $11 million that David was talking about. For example, this financial year, we are expecting between about $3.7 million and $4 million worth of funding, mostly through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade but also UN organisations, to carry out that work.

The specific work that David talked about was the recent survey that we've just done in PNG on media access. That certainly indicates that Australian services, as David said, are being positively received. It also gives a very important snapshot across PNG about media consumption and trends [inaudible] survey work that we've been doing since about 2012. That's important for everybody who wants to communicate with PNG audiences to
understand how those trends are evolving and what platforms PNG citizens are using to communicate with the region.

**Mr HILL:** Thank you. I'll go to short wave and then let other colleagues have a go. Since the short-wave radio broadcasts of Radio Australia were terminated in the Pacific in 2017, you've outlined some of the issues around the impacts. But how do we know how influential Radio Australia is now as a soft-power mechanism?

**Mr Hua:** We do have the surveys that are being done. Radio Australia continues to broadcast on FM across 11 countries in the Pacific. We know from the surveys conducted that there are over 400,000 listeners of Radio Australia each month in the Pacific and Timor Leste.

**Mr HILL:** Why is short-wave radio important in the Pacific islands, and is it still important?

**Mr Hua:** As a media organisation, it would be ideal if we could have as many touch points as possible with our audiences. We know that they are listening and engaging on a multitude of platforms, with short-wave radio being one of them. If the option was that the ABC could have all of these touch points then, yes, we would have short-wave radio as well. We wouldn't preclude anything. But, when it comes to allocating resources, and looking at the trend data, we really do need to invest very carefully in FM radio transmission, in television, in short-form video content and in digital platforms in order to get our message across.

**Mr HILL:** Have digital radio and the online platforms overtaken the shortwave radio demand in the Pacific, or is the FM transmission, which others have said is patchy in so many areas, not a substitute for shortwave?

**Mr Hua:** I daresay we're not comparing like for like with that, and it is very hard with shortwave radio, particularly because it's like a blanket that covers the globe or much of the globe where those listeners actually come from. We know that, with FM transmission, for example, you get a reach of about 30 to 60 kilometres. With digital, there are access issues, particularly around data costs. But the information that we have is that shortwave radio listening was small and reducing and that, where we can measure, audiences are on digital platforms, and we can see the growth on those.

**Mr HILL:** If that's the case then why did Radio China so quickly adopt the shortwave bandwidth after Radio Australia relinquished those frequencies? Did that move by China surprise you?

**Mr Hua:** In listening to what the old Radio Australia frequencies were—and this was done a little while ago—the broadcasts were in language, as in in Chinese and, from what I can discern from it, and I do understand Mandarin, they were directed to a domestic Chinese audience. Shortwave, as I mentioned, is like a blanket. It covers much of the entire globe. Whether there's a strategy behind that in terms of potentially then switching the content stream to be more targeted to the Pacific or otherwise, I can't comment on that. But, from what we can see—and this happens—in terms of how frequencies get relinquished and others are then free to take it up in the same way that domain names on the internet are relinquished and then others might take them up—it just happened, but we can't discern that it is specifically targeted to the Pacific at this point.

**Mr HILL:** I have a final couple of questions on this just to finish off this point. If the government of the day, be it this government or a future government, and parliament formed the view that it was a mistake to relinquish those frequencies, how difficult would it be in a technical sense to reclaim the shortwave space in the Pacific, given the difficulties you touched on before with digital access and FM transmission being patchy and so on? 'Patchy' was my word but I took it from the 60 kilometre comment.

**Mr Hua:** There are a number of options around shortwave transmission. You're not incorrect insofar as it's got a robustness to it. I wouldn't place too much emphasis on the frequencies that are being used. I think it is more about getting a signal up and the content produced that is relevant to audiences. Starting transmission on a different frequency is not an impossible task.

**Mr HILL:** My final two questions are on China and I will finish there and maybe then come back to content later in the discussion. How are Radio China and other foreign media services viewed in the Pacific and how influential is this?

**Mr Hua:** I think it's fair to say that there's growing activity from China and from other broadcasters as well. But we're very focused on our own activities and placing emphasis on strengthening our own Australian voice across the Pacific through the provision of great stories, leveraging the diaspora and the like.

**Mr HILL:** Perhaps you can take this on notice. Do you have any information about other mechanisms that China is employing in its media outreach and about how you might actually measure that impact? I understand that, quite rightly, particularly with such limited budget, you're focused on getting the best bang for the buck you can in your activities. Do you measure or assess what other mechanisms—for example, China is the market leader
in terms of dollar spend—are employed in media outreach and how popular they may be becoming given you said there's growing activity? Do we track that or measure it?

Mr Hua: We endeavour, of course, to understand our audiences as well as possible, and through that we do have some information about their media consumption habits and some of the sources of that. However, we don't actively run competitor analyses across the Pacific in the way that you've just described.

Mr HILL: Thanks.

Senator SHELDON: Thanks very much for doing a presentation on your report. You may need to take this on notice. On the difference in starting levels and work that was carried out by [inaudible] titles and what their responsibilities were from pre-2014 to now: you mentioned, of course, the decrease in funding from $35 million to $11 million now. Do you have those figures there, or do you need to take that on notice to find either way?

Mr Hua: I'll need to take it on notice, but I will say that the former managing director of the ABC did characterise it as being a thousand years of experience exiting the ABC.

Senator SHELDON: And the amount of hours that were spent—I'm probably going to use the wrong terminology, but help me by correcting it. There's material the ABC produces within Australia, and there's local content from the region. If I understood correctly, you mentioned that the regional content is four to five hours. How does that compare from pre-2014 to now?

Mr Hua: I'll have to take that on notice, but it is a reduction.

Senator SHELDON: Significant to that, of course, is engagement with the region and giving a voice to the region as part of the partnership rather than just megaphones. Our position is obviously quite important to engage the region with a clear understanding of how we value their views and help their communities.

With regard to other countries—this may already have been covered by Mr Hill's question—you covered China, Russia and other players in your comments. Is there anything you want to add to other areas? For example, China and Russia are in the region. There may be other countries you may want to comment on that are reaching out for broadcasting in other ways that we aren't.

Mr Hua: There's broad activity coming from international media organisations. This includes social media platforms, print insertions, funding opportunities for local media and the like. But I will say the difference with the ABC service—and we're really keen to focus on what it is that we do—is that we've been in the region for decades. You build a reputation based on long-term, deep relationships that you have with people. We would hope that stakeholders recognise that that reputation and our service are a national asset and should be utilised as such.

Senator SHELDON: Thank you very much for answering those questions and thank you very much for your time. The thousand years of experience being lost in 2014 is very much in my mind. It says volumes about what we need to be looking at with regard to the Pacific Step-up.

CHAIR: Mr Gorman, you had a question?

Mr GORMAN: My question—and we've sort of skated around this in a few different ways: between 2016 and now, has the ABC stepped up or stepped down its capacity in the Pacific?

Mr Hua: I would say that in terms of activities in the Pacific we have had—and I've shared some of those activities here—

Mr GORMAN: I'm looking for the quantum, rather than looking at specific projects or 'we did this' and 'we didn't do that'. Have you stepped up or stepped down your overall activity in the Pacific?

Mr Hua: I would say that there has been an overall increase in our focus on the Pacific between 2016 and now.

Mr GORMAN: How do you increase that focus with the same funding pool?

Mr Hua: It's a reprioritisation of activities. Programs like Island Music and Pacific Playtime, for example, are new.

Ms Elsom: Perhaps I could just jump in there and add that while there's always potential to do more we are also focusing on I guess having a greater impact with what we do have. For example, the international development work complements our international broadcasting role so that we're also using that to strengthen relationships. We've got partnerships in the region that we continue to work with, and have done for many years. That also is connecting Australia and the ABC with other media organisations, regional organisations and communities in the Pacific in a way that is allowing them to express their voice on issues that are affecting their lives within their local communities. So, there are complementarities there, and part of this is making sure that we
can deliver as much value for money as possible. And we're constantly in discussions with DFAT, for example, to
identify further areas where international development can help Pacific communities and work with them.

Mr GORMAN: Perhaps you could take this one on notice. I'd appreciate some more evidence that you have
in fact stepped up your activities over the past four years, up to at least 2020, in terms of journalists, content
producers and audience. You can take that on notice. I think they're metrics, rather than assertions, which I'd be
really interested in. The other thing—you might have some anecdotal evidence, which you can provide now, and
provide further evidence on notice. I think the deputy chair started to go to this. How does Australia's
broadcasting audience that we reach in the Pacific compare with that of other governments' activities in the
region?

Mr Hua: There are very limited amounts of information available around comparative audience impact. Impact
should of course be measured in a number of ways, not just through reach but also through attitudes. That's the challenge, I suppose, of soft power.

Mr GORMAN: Yes. I'm not asking about any of those other things. You're the ABC. Ratings matter. What
are your ratings? How do they compare with other countries that broadcast into the Pacific? And I'll put it really
tightly, because I think that's something that is measurable.

Mr Hua: It's actually very difficult to measure. We do our own surveys of our own platforms, and others may
do their own surveys as well. But we don't have access to those.

Mr GORMAN: There's no comparative data that you do?

Mr Hua: Again, this is regarding the research that Jo's team has recently done. There is a table in that research
that does include a couple of international television services, and that includes ABC Australia. I'll take that
information on notice and can share that. But to give you an idea—and this isn't unique to just the Pacific—there
is no ratings data that's captured in many of the markets across the Pacific. Even local media can't determine their
performance against their domestic competitors.

Mr GORMAN: I accept that it's tough, but whether we're having impact with the money that is being spent or
whether we're being outgunned might be something, Chair, that we look into in terms of what we include in the
report. It's important to actually know how we're performing—the strength of Australia's aid and efforts and how
we measure. I might leave it there.

Mr HILL: Just picking up on the funding issue, what sorts of things would you do or prioritise if you had
more funding? For example, if funding were restored to its former levels, from before the cuts, what would be the
priorities that you'd suggest for investment, to get best use of that? Hypothetically, if the committee were of a
mind to recommend such a thing, what sorts of priorities might we suggest that government consider investing
additional funds in?

Mr Hua: Thank you for that, and I'll just finish off on that previous question as well. The ABC would love to
be able to invest more in understanding what the competitive environment is for media across the Pacific.

With regard to further funding opportunities, we would love to invest more money in content and the
storytelling capabilities of the organisation, because representation, bespoke programming that is actually targeted
for Pacific audiences, where there is, importantly, inclusion and representation on screen, in voice and online, will
go a very long way to strengthening Australia's relationships with our neighbours. I can't tell you the types of
feedback that we got from taking Q+T, which is of course a flagship program of the ABC, from our colleagues at
FBC, in terms of actually seeing the whole show being put together. Programs, including programming in
language, would be important for us. We have lost French, and, as I've mentioned, there is an incredible amount
of linguistic diversity across the region. We would look at children's programming and, as I've mentioned, look at
content and themes around youth, in particular, because the Pacific is incredibly young. We would like to invest
in fostering Pacific journalism. I think most people on the committee will have heard of Heywire. We would love
to be able to build on that successful model and implement something of that nature for the Pacific, to increase the
amount of media literacy and capability within the territories. That would lift the quality of institutions and reduce
corruption and the like right across the region. We would invest in disaster preparedness, particularly around
cyclones, of course, and preparation and content around climate change. We would like to increase our
distribution points. I mentioned before that we're on FM transmission in the Pacific and that there are limits to the
radius of availability. We would like to increase that to include more countries, such as Kiribati, Palau, FSM and
Tuvalu. And we would like to have localisation for our television service too, which would mean we could have
more bespoke programming that we could acquire from commercial networks as well as from independent and
our own production, to be able to share stories which are more targeted and relevant to our audiences.
Mr HILL: You have obviously given a bit of thought to that; that's really insightful. You mentioned building mutuality and producing Pacific content; they have been a big theme of our discussion. Could you clarify, is this programming being produced in various languages? In her address to the Lowy Institute in October 2019, the ABC board chair, Ita Buttrose, said:

We continue to produce content in languages other than English, but regrettably, not at the same levels as we have been able to in the past.

In what ways has the level of in-language programming been reduced? Is it less programming overall, certain languages that have been dropped or is it only French, as you mentioned? It would be helpful, if you could take some of that detail on notice.

Mr Hua: Sure, I will. To give you an idea, we had published content, not just for the Pacific but in Burmese, in Khmer, in Vietnamese and in French. They are all languages which have been ceased. The languages that we continue to have are Tok Pisin, Bahasa Indonesia and Chinese. Bahasa Indonesia and Chinese are digital services only, so there are no broadcast outcomes; although the team does produce short-form video as part of their remit as well. It's actually quite heartbreaking. When I was doing research for the anniversary last year of 80 years of Australia's international broadcasting, looking back at the 70s and 80s, we had far more languages and capability than we do now. But we're actually very focused on what we can do. My opening remark to this committee was that not enough people actually know that the ABC continues to do this work. Our audiences internationally don't advocate in the same way and can't advocate in the same way that our domestic audiences do.

Mr HILL: Clearly a leadership function that, ultimately, is up to parliamentarians, I suppose. The final question would be—

CHAIR: Mr Hill, you've asked your last two questions. We do have other witnesses waiting to get on the call so could you make this question on notice?

Mr HILL: Sure. It's a great list of things that would all assist in fostering our safety and security in the region that they currently can't do because of the budget situation. Thank you for your evidence.

CHAIR: Mr Hua and Ms Elsom, thanks for your attendance today. You will be sent a copy of the transcript of your evidence and you will have an opportunity to request corrections to transcription errors. I believe you may have been asked a number of questions on notice, so if you could please respond to those in due course. Once again, thank you for your contribution to the hearing today.

Mr Hua: Thank you, our pleasure.
DORNEY, Mr Sean, AO, Private capacity

GARRETT, Ms Jemima, Co-convenor, Australia Asia Pacific Media Initiative

O’KEEFFE, Ms Annmaree, AM, Steering Committee Member, Australia Asia Pacific Media Initiative

Evidence was taken via teleconference—[11:53]

CHAIR: I believe we now have representatives from Australia Asia Pacific Media Initiative. I wish to advise you that in giving evidence to the subcommittee today you are protected by parliamentary privilege. I also remind you of the obligation not to give false or misleading evidence; to do so may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament. These are public proceedings; although the subcommittee may agree to a request to have evidence heard in camera or may determine that certain evidence should be heard in camera. Would any of you like to make a brief opening statement before we proceed to discussion? We obviously have your submission here, which is very thoughtful. Thank you for making that contribution. You are free to talk to particular elements of that you'd like to highlight for the committee.

Ms Garrett: I thank the committee for the opportunity to share our thoughts. As a bit of my background: I've worked as a journalist in the Pacific for more than 30 years, mostly for the ABC, including as the South Pacific correspondent. I've also worked for more than 20 years as a trainer of Pacific journalists and now work more broadly in media development. Australia's Asia Pacific Media Initiative is a very unusual community organisation. We're made up of mainly former media executives, journalists and technologists who've worked for decades in the region at the highest level of both commercial and public broadcasting. We have other experts and we also have members of Australia's Asia Pacific diaspora communities and South Sea Island communities. We are a pro bono group and we really came together in the national interest in 2018, because our members could see that, in the new geostrategic environment, it's really quite urgent that Australia rebuild its multiplatform media voice across Asia and the Pacific. It's interesting to note that within a fortnight of establishing ourselves, AAPMI had supporters in most Australian states and territories and in 10 countries, including Indonesia, Timor Leste, Papua New Guinea and right across the Pacific.

As you will have seen from our submission, we've got two recommendations for the committee in the Pacific. The first recommendation is a significant rebuilding of Australia's media capabilities, focusing on co-productions and joint content creation between Australian and Pacific media. The second recommendation is for an increase in Australia's capacity development for Pacific media to at least 0.6 per cent of the aid budget, which is in line with global standards.

A few key points: we've all seen the evacuation this week of two Australian journalists from China, so I'll start with the big picture. The bottom line in the Pacific is that China's media push is significant, and Australia's media voice and its development programs are not keeping up. China has comprehensive radio, TV and online services, and it has correspondents in places like Fiji, where the Australian media does not. China's media services in the region are reaching out for partnerships, and I think this answers one of the questions earlier. It's not only having an impact on the way governments approach media in terms of media freedom and restrictions on media but it also has the potential to make local media financially dependent on help from different parties or editorially compromised. Even a harmless-looking paid lift-out, because the media is under a lot of financial pressure, could be enough to make the difference between make or break. We've even seen the impact of Chinese media on the reporting of Australian foreign policy in the region. An example in the lead-up to the last election was that the only report to appear in the Fiji media of the headline foreign policy speech by Penny Wong was actually a story by-lined by Xinhua. As you can imagine, that didn't include all of the issues.

China's also pushing local stations to run its news coverage, including of sensitive issues like Hong Kong. It's offering money, and this is new, for joint content production. It's also been doing trips for media, internships in China. You're aware of the shortwave frequencies that it's now using, not in the region but they've gone to China. And the media push by China has stepped up since COVID. I am happy to take questions on that later. But regardless of what China is doing, AAPMI believes that Australia's relationships with the Pacific are important in their own right and for their own sake and so we very much welcome the Step-up. We think it's a constructive and timely new engagement. We believe that the media has a lot to offer as a policy tool to strengthen and expand the work of the Step-up.

I think David Hua highlighted that media reaches hundreds of thousands of people every day, or millions if it's done well, and it reaches from opinion leaders to excluded urban populations and to remote villages, so it can create multilayered conversations, better understanding and, in fact, lasting affection. And it's 24/7 nature means...
that media has the capability to amplify the impact of, really, every aspect of Australia's engagement. So AAPMI are not simply recommending a larger role for Australian media but actually proposing an innovative new model, and that's one that would ensure that Australia talks with and not to the region. And it would be focused on, as I said, joint content creation and co-productions, with Australian and Pacific media working together.

Unfortunately, despite the very real commitment in the step-up to listen and to engage respectfully, research and other submissions that your committee has received—I think, particularly, from the Whitlam Institute and Associate Professor Joanne Wallis—as well as the anecdotal evidence that AAPMI has had from its own very extensive network in the region, indicate that significant numbers of people in the Pacific still find Australia's engagement sometimes paternalistic and lacking in cultural understanding. So we feel that a rebuilt Australian media service focused on this joint content creation would create the conversations that would make visible the equal and respectful dialogue that the step-up is rightly seeking. It really needs a step change to break this issue. When I first went to the Pacific 30 years ago, this was an issue, and we haven't cracked it. So I think, with the new kinds of technologies, we have an opportunity now. To do this, the dialogue needs to extend beyond news and discussion programs to include drama, culture, kids' programs, sport, business programs and so on.

This approach would very much answer the need articulated by people in the Pacific. In 2017 and 2018, the then Prime Minister of Vanuatu took the very unusual step of writing to two Australian inquiries about the need for more Australian media and support for local media. Ministers from other countries in the Pacific, agency heads, the Pacific Conference of Churches, business and community leaders have also made these points. So there's clear demand from the region. New co-pros and joint content creation would answer their pleas, and actually hearing the voice of the Pacific much more clearly in Australia would do much to increase understanding of the Pacific in Australia.

Our model is that the media voice in the region should be the best of Australia, with the involvement of the full spectrum of media companies; the ABC, obviously; commercial media; SBS, and National Indigenous Television; and independent producers—in particular, the diaspora producers. Media is really an ideal means of bringing the diaspora and South Sea island communities into this conversation. There's a lot of hidden talent in those diaspora communities, from those who have worked in Hollywood right to the level of community podcasters and new media producers. I'm thinking of people like Samoan Australian Jay Laga'aia, who has had roles in some of the Star Wars movies. He's worked for commercial dramas in Australia, such as Water Rats. He loves presenting Play School and he also has his own media company producing independent children's programs. There are also people like Tongan Australian Uli Latukefu—

**CHAIR:** Ms Garrett, sorry, I've just got to pull you up there. We do have a number of questions, so would you mind wrapping up your opening remarks quite quickly.

**Ms Garrett:** No problem. Okay. The final point is about misinformation and COVID. Obviously, media, particularly respected media, can play an important role in countering misinformation, and during COVID I think we need more communication channels. Our face-to-face links and people-to-people links have been reduced, and Zoom only goes so far. Media has the ability to continue those conversations—and to provide drama and escapism. So the message is that the time for one-way conversations is over. Technology, including the fibre optic cables and new capability, makes for a much more interactive and collaborative style of media, and we believe that media has the capability to amplify the impact of, really, every aspect of Australia's engagement.

**CHAIR:** Thanks for that, Ms Garrett. Mr Dorney or Ms O'Keefe, do you wish to speak as well, or shall we go to questions and you can contribute to the answers?

**Ms O'Keefe:** Chair, if it's okay with you, I have just a couple of comments I want to make—a bit of a comparison of Australia with the rest of the world in terms of broadcasting being a very important foreign policy or soft-power tool for quite a number of countries, including the UK, the US, China of course, Japan, Russia and the Koreas. Australia stands out as having stepped away from broadcasting as an important tool in our public diplomacy kit, and the question is: why? I think there are several reasons. Firstly, international broadcasting and its potency is not recognised at government level as a public diplomacy tool. Proof of that can be found in the 2017 foreign policy white paper. It's not mentioned at all, although international broadcasting was featured in the earlier white paper, in 2003. Secondly, there's no government endorsed strategic guidance, unlike in the UK, the US and, indeed, China. There is no guidance to Australia's international broadcaster on how it should be supporting Australia's national interests. There are simply a couple of sentences in the ABC's charter, which of course we all know about. Thirdly, there has been no assessment of Australia's international broadcasting for its fitness to adapt to the changing international context, nor its potential to advance Australia's strategic interests. That is well overdue. And, finally, the budget, or the dwindling budget, has been the key decider in what
Australia's international broadcaster does and can focus on, rather than considering the strategic importance to Australia in terms of the Pacific and how this all relates to the Pacific. Jemima covered that exceptionally well.

I just want to point out that, from an international broadcasting perspective, the Pacific is a textbook scenario. Aside from the need to counter the expanding Chinese influence, which you've all heard about, the whole region is very undisturbed by mainstream media, which risks leaving the provision of services to other countries, whose interests are not necessarily those of Australia. The Pacific, as you know, is a regional geo-strategic priority. It's got dispersed populations, making the ratings very difficult to determine, because they're so remote and so difficult to actually access, except via radio. But the urban governing elite does have access to domestic and international media and they are very much influenced by various interests. Finally, it's time to build on what is an increasingly dwindling legacy. Radio Australia, in particular, has had a stellar past, but its present and its future are not looking so great. That's all I wanted to say.

CHAIR: Thanks, Ms O'Keeffe. Mr Dorney, do you wish to add anything?

Mr Dorney: Yes. I'll be very brief. I realise we're running out of time. My career was devoted to Papua New Guinea and the Pacific. I was extremely lucky to spend so many years travelling around the Pacific. I lived in Papua New Guinea for quite some time and visited almost every other Pacific island country. One of the points that I think is worth making is that Pacific islanders actually like us if we show them some respect. I was amongst the 80 people who were shown the door when Australia Network ceased to function in 2014. One of the reasons I was a bit annoyed about that is that I thought I had become extremely cost-efficient. As a journalist, I was not only writing all my scripts and doing all my interviews; I was also my own cameraman and my own editor, and I used to send my stories of 30 to 50 megabytes back to Australia via very thin internet connections, which meant many hours spent in hotel rooms. But the vacant space that was left there when Australia Network disappeared, as people have said, has really been taken over by China. Throughout my time as the Pacific correspondent for the ABC, I saw this Chinese influence growing everywhere. I'll just end off by saying that, if we did boost broadcasting again, it does require greater collaboration. There are excellent journalists out there in the Pacific that we could work with to create content for both of us. It's our region, and I think we should embrace it.

CHAIR: Thanks Mr Dorney, Ms Garrett and Ms O'Keeffe. In your submission and I think in your opening remarks, Ms Garrett, you mentioned the DFAT soft power review. I don't know if that soft power review has actually been made public, but were you consulted or were you aware of it canvassing some of the issues you've raised today?

Ms Garrett: We did put in a major submission to the soft power review, and I think they did do deep dives into various issues. But, despite the fact that probably around 10 per cent of the submissions were on broadcasting, including from the region, I don't think they did a deep dive on broadcasting. They chose other areas.

CHAIR: It hasn't actually been published yet, has it?

Ms Garrett: I don't think so. I haven't read it.

CHAIR: In your submission and your comments you also mentioned your recommendation that we spend a fixed percentage of our development assistance budget building the capacity of Pacific public interest media, which I'm very attracted to as an idea. I think your recommendations is that 0.6 per cent of the development assistance budget should go towards this sort of capacity building for local media roles. Do you have a sense of how much is currently allocated to that purpose?

Ms Garrett: I agree with those figures that Joe Elsom put in. I did have some. I think it's three-point-something million dollars in the Pacific, roughly, a year. There aren't many figures on the public record on this. So of the $1.4 billion that goes into the Pacific in total aid, that would be about $8.9 million. I guess one of the reasons why this is important alongside increasing Australia's own involvement is that we need to do this in partnership, and we don't want to put Pacific media out of business. They're actually facing a bit of an existential crisis themselves at the moment, partly because of the digital disruption but also because of added revenue falls due to COVID. Australia has been the lead operator in terms of assisting public interest media. That's dropped away in terms of the quantity of funding as the aid budget's gone down. It's really not enough. There needs to be some consistent support, and particularly support in areas that we're not working in at the moment, such as assisting with business models. The torch for media freedom and public interest journalism in the region is actually held by the private sector, so we need to help those private sector media companies get themselves on a good footing for the future.

CHAIR: They are good points. Thank you. I'm quite interested in this idea of building local media capability, because, whilst making sure an Australian voice is heard in the Pacific is important, some of the functions that we
wish an independent media to perform are things that are better not done by the Australian media—holding local actors to account and shining a spotlight on foreign practices that we don't think serve the interests of the Pacific countries well in the long term. Obviously that needs to be told with a local voice to have credibility and weight, and that relies upon local networks. I'd be interested in Mr Dorney's thoughts on this as well, given his experience. What do we do and what have we done in the past with things like secondments, twinning arrangements, cadetships and partnerships with Pacific based media organisations to help build their human capital, in a partnership sense, with Australian media outlets and organisations?

Ms Garrett: Can I just say something on the local voice. It's quite difficult in those small communities, with very controversial stories sometimes, for Pacific journalists to break stories or hold media to account. One of the things that has been done in the past is that they would feed something to, say, an ABC journalist like Sean or me, we would break the story and they would be able to report under the cover of the ABC. My colleague Bruce Hill called it 'information laundering'. That kind of partnership is important—as is this joint content creation with the Australian partner. When it comes to the attachments and so forth, again, this is an area where Australia has been under pressure, in its development assistance, to hand over more training roles to the Pacific. There are a lot of excellent, very experienced journalists who can play training roles. We should be supporting them to strengthen the media in their own country.

There are also attachments to like media organisations in Australia—China has really made this one of its own areas. Again, it's an area in which Australia should step up. I'm sure Sean has some good thoughts on that.

CHAIR: Mr Dorney, would you like to add something that?

Mr Dorney: Sorry, I've lost the plot a little bit here. What was the question again?

CHAIR: I'm interested in what we have done in the past, in your journalism career in the Pacific, in terms of helping build local media capacity through secondments, twinning, scholarships, cadetships—the whole works—as partner to partner based organisations, and often involving a specific journalist sitting in an Australian bureau or coming to Australia to learn our skills, as well as the reverse.

Mr Dorney: Way back when David Hill was the boss of the ABC, I convinced him that we should start our relationship with the National Broadcasting Commission of Papua New Guinea again. That led on to years of terrific support being given by ABC training in the NBC. People were sent up there, and some NBC journalists and other people were brought down to Australia. That's in a much-reduced form now, but I thought that was exceptionally effective.

CHAIR: Did any of the commercial networks or other Australian networks get involved in that?

Mr Dorney: For a while the commercial network out of Newcastle, NBN, had an involvement with Papua New Guinea. But there didn't seem to me to be a lot of exchange of people going on—and I'm, not aware of too much else.

CHAIR: Did you want to add to that, Ms Garrett?

Ms Garrett: I've recently done an in-depth study of Fiji media. The sorts of things that they were talking about that would help them included working collaboratively on programs. Dave Hua mentioned $A+Q. That was very well received. That 'learning by doing' establishes relationships, at the same time as showing how things can be done in country with the smaller country resources that the Pacific has. The 'co-pro' kills a lot of birds with one stone, it's very good bang for the buck, in that you are working on real output, learning with counterpart colleagues and doing it in a context which is suitable to the local environment—and producing content that they can also use on their outlets.

Mr HILL: I want to pick up on those issues around commercial TV. Ms Garrett, how is the government's PacificAus TV initiative being received in the Pacific? That's the $17.1 million provided to Free TV Australia—I think that's channels 7, 9 and 10—to provide content to Pacific broadcasting. I've just been reflecting on your comments about co-production and wondering whether this initiative is working or whether we are missing the opportunity to co-produce content with our neighbours, and could that $17 million be better directed at co-productions rather than giving the free networks a chance just to pump out their stuff? I'm curious about your thoughts on that.

Ms Garrett: My thoughts on the feedback coming from the region are really about what this says about Australia's relationship, and they want a conversation with the region. So providing material that's been made for an Australian audience is not the first option, and in fact it's not what the Pacific has asked for. However, having said that, a lot of them are so keen for content that a lot of it will be taken up. I guess if you're looking in terms of building the step-up, it wouldn't be the first choice, and there are plenty of things that the commercials can do. There's a very good program which was actually part funded by DFAT called Pacific Island Food Revolution,
which is in this exact joint content creation area. It took leading chefs in beautiful places, using local food. It was very entertaining, plus it had health messages about nutrition, which dealt with the obviously huge question of non-communicable diseases. So there is a role for every kind of Australian media, but it really needs to be on this basis of having an equal interactive conversation, not just sort of opening the cupboard and sending our reruns to the Pacific.

Mr Hill: We could make some Neighbours jokes and stuff, but I’ll refrain. I went to the set of Neighbours once—that’s a different story. On the lack of strategic guidance being provided to the ABC, what should DFAT be doing to ensure Australia is using its media resources more efficiently?

Ms Garrett: I’d have to say the ABC is, as I think one of you identified, big bang for the buck. The BBC provides a good model here, and Annmaree would have very good comments on this. One of the reasons why media has soft power is that it’s seen as being editorially independent. So it’s very important to maintain that independence. But I do think there’s more to be done, and it really comes down to resources. The ABC has been trying to build up a Pacific island stringer network, and it’s made a lot of progress, but it just doesn’t have the money. It pays half what The Guardian pays, which has been wildly successful. Lots of colleagues in the Pacific are very keen to work for Radio Australia, but they basically do it for love and exposure at the moment. So it’s a resource issue and there needs to be more effort put into more Pacific voices and diaspora voices, I think.

Ms O’Keeffe: If I could come in on that particular question. The problem is that DFAT hasn’t had a voice in putting together some sort of broadcasting strategy, whether it’s for the ABC or whether it’s for a broader group or institution. Funding for ABC’s international work is part and parcel of the budget or the funding it gets from the department of communications. It’s rather difficult when you look at the different ABC reports and the department of communications reports to actually have to say which bit of the budget should be going to international broadcasting. It’s opaque, to say the least. So there’s not only no strategy; the agency or the department that should have visibility and close linkages with the ABC to actually develop some sort of strategic approach is not part of the institutional framework.

Mr Hill: That’s a really thoughtful response—thank you. There have been some real themes here in the two submissions, and I think the next one to come, about the criticality of this public diplomacy and communications and broadcasting to Australia’s safety and security and that, by increasing our soft power, that has positive impacts for our broader defence spend, at a fraction of the cost of hard power and hard defence. Just reflecting, I think Ms Garrett and maybe the others would have some comment: since the cessation of the shortwave radio service and the Radio Australia network and so on in 2013-14, what have been the most detrimental impacts associated with that?

On the flipside of that—and I’ll will just bundle the two questions together—you’ve argued for a significant funding increase. What would you say would be the priority for application of additional funding if it were received of that magnitude?

Ms Garrett: Shortwave is relevant to the very remote areas that can’t be reached by FM. It’s also relevant in disasters. We’ve had people in the Solomon Islands, PNG and Vanuatu saying that they only heard that a cyclone was coming and what was happening in terms of a response because of Radio Australia if the local FM towers or phones are knocked out. I know the ABC is working with Radio New Zealand. There are synergies to be gained by using Radio New Zealand’s shortwave capacity.

In terms of what you’d spend the money on, content absolutely. There is actually no real relevant content—that’s going too far; there is. What the ABC is doing is good, but it just isn’t anywhere near big enough. The output of ABC Australia on television used to run in the downtime of Fiji Broadcasting. Now they take Aljazeera because it’s not specific enough. There needs to be quite a bit of money spent on content. If you look at it from the national interest, the questions are: which audience do you wish to address? what content do they need? what platforms are the way to deliver it? Really you start with the national interest and then go to what content. Then you decide whether it’s shortwave, digital or a mix of TV and radio or whether they’re opinion leaders in the city, the general population in rural areas or whatever.

Mr Dorney: I want to make one point in relation to shortwave. The ABC seems to think that FM is the answer, but there are so many parts of Papua New Guinea where you cannot pick up the FM signal if it’s in a capital of a province. For example, when we went back to Pauline’s village—my wife is from Manus Island—one thing she noted afterwards was, ‘I never heard the radio on,’ because my brother always used to listen to Radio Australia.

Ms Garrett: There’s an issue that’s little explored. In our more complex times we’ve seen in West Papua and Kashmir the internet turned off. What means of communication do you use when that happens? On the FM
question, the ABC used to bring all Pacific island members of the forum together in one ideas marketplace. There was one place where policy could be discussed at a serious level. There are now 10 countries that don't receive those radio services. That's why this idea of putting FM stations in the capitals of Pacific countries that have lost them is really important. Regional architecture is a very important part of the step-up. Pacific islanders and Australians need to join together in a discussion about these issues in one place, and there's no media outlet, whether it be local Pacific or international, that does that. Really only Australia has the capability to do that.

Mr HILL: I think those two observations you've made there are incredibly important. I hadn't made that connection. In another subcommittee of the broader standing committee we're looking at the Magnitsky act. One thing that has been impressed upon us is the new type of suppression of democracy and human rights where governments are able to simply turn the internet off and intervene in that way. That's a very interesting observation about the potential of shortwave and other things to get around that ability.

You mentioned that the BBC provides a good model, seems editorially independent and so on. Does the UK's approach include a strategic approach to managing misinformation?

Ms Garrett: I couldn't answer that. The observation I would make about that in the South Pacific is that this is something that the professional organisations of journalists in the Pacific are very worried about, but they don't have the wherewithal to develop policy and for the media to start to play a role. So I would say that there's a very big role for Australia to support the media associations in the region. Despite some growing interest from some other countries in getting more involved in the media sector, I don't think there's anyone who's going to do that except Australia, so that's quite important. I guess this is another role that Australia has, in terms of being a role model in the region.

CHAIR: Senator Sheldon, I believe you have a question, and then, if there are no other questions, we'll move onto the next witness.

Senator SHELDON: Thanks very much again for your evidence and your submission. To the question of the soft power review that was commissioned by the previous minister, Julie Bishop, and that still hasn't been published by the department, I was wondering: if you were able to say what conclusions you would hope to see in that long-awaited review, what would the conclusions be? Maybe you could also explain the reasons that you'd like to hopefully see those conclusions out of that review.

Ms Garrett: I'd direct you to our two recommendations, and perhaps Annmaree has something to say on this.

Ms O'Keeffe: It is disappointing that the soft power report has not been released. It's been sitting on someone's shelf for a very long time. To go back to the 2017 white paper, which is the only other recent guide, if you like, to the Australian government's approach to public diplomacy, clearly public diplomacy includes things like culture, education, sport and visitors. That's all been included in the white paper. I would hope that the soft power report recognises that, in addition to those four areas, international broadcasting is also a key pillar for that public diplomacy approach.

Ms Garrett: In fact, you could argue that international broadcasting is the most powerful soft power tool, because not only is it powerful in its own right; it amplifies all those other areas that Annmaree was talking about.

Senator SHELDON: Given that we aren't producing Radio Australia in French, Vietnamese, Khmer and other languages of the Pacific, what do you think the impact of that is on soft power, and could you, maybe, make an observation on the loss of soft power?

Ms Garrett: I'd say it's enormous. In fact, in Cambodia and Laos, the ABC used to have higher ratings than the BBC. Originality and the language of choice of the audience you're addressing are absolutely crucial. Providing languages is expensive, but it's absolutely vital to soft power. That obviously includes the Pacific. We could consider Fijian, Samoan and Tongan. Certainly, if you look at the decimation of the Tok Pisin service at the ABC, there are two staff members there who provide daily coverage. Radio New Zealand does a very good job in the Pacific, but it's mainly in Polynesia. So, that particular language service needs beefing up.

CHAIR: Are there any final questions from committee members?

Mr HILL: I just wanted to say thank you. I didn't say that, but I thought it was a superb submission, and the evidence and the clarity of responses were really helpful. I was taken by the phrase in your submission that said 'Australia's media voice in the region has never been weaker at a time when it is most needed.' Thank you for your very thoughtful advice.

Ms Garrett: Thank you for the opportunity.
CHAIR: Thanks, Ms Garrett, Mr Dorney and Ms O'Keeffe, for your attendance here today. You will be sent a copy of the transcript of your evidence and you'll have an opportunity to request corrections to transcription errors at that time. Thanks again for your attendance and your contribution to this inquiry.
Evidence was taken via teleconference—

12:34

CHAIR: Welcome. Thank you for joining us, and I'm sorry for the delay.

Mr Dobell: No, it was wonderful to listen to three amazing individuals like Sean, Annmareae and Jemima. You've just had a superb presentation.

CHAIR: Would you like to make an opening statement? We've seen your submission, and thank you very much for the thought and attention you've put into that. Would you like to expand on elements of that or highlight it before we move to questions?

Mr Dobell: No, I think I'd like to go to questions. I'd like to give as much time as possible to the committee, please—and to thank you for the very creative way you've gone about doing a series of inquiries in South Pacific. In all the years I've been covering the joint committee, I think that's a really innovative way to acknowledge the multidimensional issues we're confronting in the South Pacific.

CHAIR: Alright; thank you, Mr Dobell. I'll start. At the heart of your submission is a sense that we should be doing some more, in terms of broadcasting into the Asia-Pacific. Particularly, we're focused on the south-west Pacific, in that instance. I think one of your recommendations is to increase the budget for international broadcasting, significantly, to almost quadruple it or a little more. How are those additional resources best spent and directed, in your opinion, if they are to be obtained?

Mr Dobell: I think I'd like to approach that question by talking about, in a sense, the frame of that discussion a little bit. The way we frame it helps to tell us a little bit about how we'd be thinking about what we're doing. I'd point, obviously, to what Jemima and the others have been talking to you about. But if we step back and try and think about the geostrategic circumstances we're looking at, the geopolitics of what we're looking at, even the geoeconomics we're looking at, that starts to inform the way we think about how we'd be trying to be more creative and to do more.

You've been given a very good frame by the 2020 strategic update. I really think that is a very serious and rather dark view of the geostrategic position we're facing, and I think the Prime Minister nailed it pretty well with that opening speech, where he talked about a post-COVID world that is poorer, more dangerous and more disorderly. There's no doubt that the South Pacific is going to suffer economically. I think you're already thinking about what it's going to mean for Fiji, for instance, if Fiji's economy shrinks by as much as a third, maybe more, because of its reliance on tourism, thinking about what that means for people going hungry in Fiji. In Papua New Guinea, not as reliant on tourism, the problems it faces are when it starts to look at what might happen if COVID starts to creep in. It feeds through to the much larger set of discussions about what sorts of partnerships, what sort of economic and people integration, Australia is offering the region. I think that's the way I'd be trying to frame that sort of discussion, about what more we should be doing.

CHAIR: Just to expand a little bit on the COVID-19 element and the post-COVID outlook in the Pacific, what's your sense—it's obviously early days yet and no-one has a crystal ball—on how the two- to five-year ramifications of the pandemic for Pacific island countries are and where the effects are going to be most concentrated and where they're going to be least concentrated?

Mr Dobell: It's fascinating, isn't it, when you try and bring the dimension of the geoeconomics to our normal discussion of the geopolitics and the geo-economics?

One of the interesting things is the way that we have, in how our aid budget, pivoted pretty well. There has been a pivot by Australia in the way it's allocating resources. Some programs obviously couldn't go ahead. We've been able to move pretty creatively and pretty quickly to try and start genning up what we're doing. The team that has just gone into Papua New Guinea is a good example of how we're trying to get ahead of the curve. In fact, I've been hearing in terms of the discussion of China that there's already a bit of feedback that, if nothing else, at least the quality of the PPE we're putting out there is a hell of a lot better than China's, which is a nice thing to hear.

In terms of the longer term, I think that it actually puts even more weight on our long-term integration discussion. There was discussion of the idea a couple of months ago of what a Pacific bubble would look like, and talking about what that would mean for us and our integration with the Pacific. That Pacific bubble discussion was interesting because it raised all of the other issues that we've been talking about in terms of integration. What sort of institutional integration? What level of access would we be giving to the Pacific? How much access would they have to us?
In terms of your specific question, I think what it says is that the way the Pacific has succeeded has been by shutting down and shutting out. As a health response, the Pacific has done extremely well. I think we'd agree on that. They have managed to shut down and shut it out. But as a long-term response—as you say, over a two- to five-year response—particularly if our vaccine investigations don't deliver as we would hope, that then asks a lot of questions of what sort of levels of poverty and levels of economic activity there would be and what that means for the way we think about how we do aid in the region and the hierarchy of our aid. What will it mean to what we think are the most important aid deliveries we're going to have to begin? As I say, I think Australia's done pretty well in trying to pivot very quickly, but we're going to have to be very, very agile because the sorts of problems confronting the Pacific—it is going to be poorer, it is going to be facing more economic problems—are going to feed through to lots of other dimensions of those societies.

CHAIR: Thank you.

Mr HILL: Thank you so much for your evidence. There are a lot of themes, obviously, across the three submissions and discussions that we've been having today, so I'll try not to go over too much of the previous ground. It sounds like you were listening to some of them, so feel free to add any additional comments to what we've already discussed. One of the things that really struck me about your submission, looking through it, was the very evocative use of language, if I can say that, around how the Pacific islands see us. On page 7 you talked about a view rendering Australia as a bully, not a brother:

Refer back to the creed: we loom large and everyone knows we're needed. But we'll never be loved—big powers seldom are. So you're suggesting that an increase in public diplomacy and media investment is critical to addressing those hearts and minds issues, if you like—the perception that Pacific islanders may have. I mean the people, not the government. Is that a fair kind of reading at the core of what you're saying?

Mr Dobell: It's a complicated one, isn't it? One way of thinking about it is of course that the Pacific knows and remembers and understands Australia in many ways better than we do the other way. Because their relationship with us is so constant at so many different levels—deliveries of fuel, where you go to go anywhere else in the world and where you might get your air flights, and what if the Australian fuel ship's a few days late?

One of the interesting things about all of that: when I talk to people about, for instance, Papua New Guinea, I like to make the point that there's only one country in the world where the major, No. 1 football code is Rugby League. And often, when you're talking about Papua New Guinea and Rugby League, Papua New Guinea's focus is not on Australia; it is on Queensland. And if you really want to get into the Rugby League dynamics: if you add Papua New Guinea to the Queensland population, they're going to win on the football field every time. So, the story is not so much about what they know about us; they know us extraordinarily well. I think Sean Dorney's right. In my experience across the South Pacific—like Sean, I think I've been to most of the islands of the forum—because they know us so well, they think that most of the time our heart is by and large in the right place but our head is sometimes a bit far off in some ways. We often don't quite get it right. And we're lousy at singing; we just can't sing. But we do tend to pay for the beer. By and large they like us, and they understand us and they know us very well.

I tried to put some of the optimism of that in the submission, to talk about—on the value stuff, on beliefs, on how people think about their lives—how these are societies that in so many ways speak our language, whether it be Christianity, whether it be even just an ability to use English as the lingua franca. They are essentially pro-Western, pro-capitalist, conservative societies in many ways. There's so much there for us to play for and play with. But it's probably more a matter of us playing to our potential rather than worrying too much about how we're perceived, because they've got a pretty good view of us, quite frankly.

Mr HILL: So, leveraging that potential and building on those perceptions of Australia and how it uses its power will do much to determine the success and reach of the step-up. That is very useful. There is another question I want to ask you, on climate change. You talk a little about the difficulty and one of the impediments to this deeper relationship and the grander objectives of deeper integration being our position on climate change. Is there anything you can add on that?

Mr Dobell: I think there are a couple of dimensions to it. One of them—and I was a little bit cynical in my ordering of those five big challenges that they face—at one level climate change is an existential threat for the micro states; there's no doubt about that. But to stand back just a little, it is the case that this is a unifying external factor that unites the islands. The politics and diplomacy of climate change is a uniter for the islands. And it doesn't hurt them to have a very important external figure that they can bash against, in the same way that in an earlier era the French nuclear testing was a great unifier diplomatically for the forum. It brought us all together.
So, having an external—I hesitate to use the word 'enemy'—figure that you can have an argument with is a great uniting force for the forum.

I think the point for us is that we have to understand the concerns. We have to do more than merely nod towards the existential threat. We have to acknowledge that the sorts of effects on coastal communities across the Pacific are demonstrable, that they are part of their lived experience. If that then feeds into other forces affecting the islands—urbanisation, the shift to the cities, this huge youth bulge that these islands have; there are a range of cascading forces—it is about an Australia that focuses in its language as well as in its actions. I think our actions on mitigation and on tackling the problems are what you'd expect from a pragmatic, involved country like Australia, but I think we do have a presentational problem on climate change. We are not seen to have got onto the South Pacific, if you're a Pacific islander journalist, is always a tough thread; it's across the—

Mr HILL: One final question, as I'm mindful that the chair wants to close the hearing at one.

CHAIR: And there's a question from Senator Sheldon as well.

Mr HILL: Sure. This is a question which we've put to previous witnesses. There's been a range of discussions around the impacts of the cuts in 2013 and the cessation of the broader network. Would you point to any particularly important things that you think have been lost over the last seven years? Your submission, along with AAPMI's, argues for an increase in the order of $55 million to $75 million per annum and that that funding level would allow us to rebuild audiences, maximise our soft-power goals and build partnerships. What specifically would you point to as being the priorities for investment with new funds? Would it be content? Is it infrastructure? Is it partnerships? We've heard a range of views expressed. I'm curious as to your view about the output priorities.

Mr Dobell: Again, I'd like to frame it a little bit differently, because I think the evidence in the submission you've got from the Australia Asia Pacific Media Initiative goes to some of that. The way I'd like to put it to you, coming perhaps more from where I sit, at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, is to say that if we are in a new set of contests, militarily, diplomatically and economically, then probably one of the key contests that we're in is in the information space, the communications space. I think the strategic update was very interesting in its discussion of the new threats that we see from disinformation and grey-zone activities. That needs to inform a discussion about getting back into the media game, big time, in the region. One of the ways of thinking about it is that Canberra has become increasingly agitated over the last couple of years. It's very concerned about what it sees China doing in the region and is focused on Melanesia, particularly, and the dangers we would see if China succeeded in buying itself a government, in buying itself a cabinet. We've already seen China nibbling at that a little bit recently.

The question I put to you, in responding to what you said, is: What would we do to speak to the people of a Melanesian country to try and tell them that their government had just been bought? How would that conversation take place? In earlier eras, I think we know how that conversation might have gone, both in terms of the way we would have reported it and the way island reporters would have reported it. But it's worth thinking about what our weaponry is, to use that sort of image, in this new era of information contest and grey-zone activity. If we have disarmed and dismantled, as we have, in the information space in the South Pacific, one of the ways of thinking about getting back is that we are needing to rearm and rebuild but to do it with new thinking around platform-neutral approaches. Where would we be putting our money? We'd be putting our money not just in traditional broadcasting hardware. We'd be looking at the sorts of apps that we wanted to get on the phones in the South Pacific. You've heard several times today about what sort of co-productions we could be doing. We'd be thinking about what we could do to help the journalistic culture and the values in the region, the free media values that we share. Doing journalism in the South Pacific, if you're a Pacific islander journalist, is always a tough thread; it's always a tough gig—short of money and always under lots of pressure from your own government and your own people. Part of Australia's role is always to help make that space for Pacific journalism.

Mr HILL: Thank you. That's a very sophisticated answer, and you've sketched a very sophisticated strategy. I think it picks up on a lot of that work that Ross Babbage has done on winning without fighting in the grey zone and how we need to get back in the information game, and there's a soft and a hard dimension to that. So thank you; that's very useful.

CHAIR: It was indeed a very good answer. Senator Sheldon.

Senator SHELDON: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Mr Dobell. I concur with your view about [inaudible]. Thankfully in my case it's not a requirement for diplomatic relations with [inaudible].
Mr Dobell: One of the worst things ever is to be leading an Australian delegation at the Solomon Islands or Vanuatu. At the farewell they sing to you and you're supposed to sing back to them.

Senator SHELDON: A frightening thought for them in my case!

Mr Dobell: And mine!

Senator SHELDON: You mentioned in your report the need for the annual budget for broadcasting to be increased from $16.7 million to $75 million for Asia Pacific. We've had evidence that pre 2004 $35 million dollars were spent, particularly in the Pacific region with Radio Australia, and now we're down to $11 million. How imperative do you see that figure of $75 million being reinstated is for our success in soft diplomacy engagement with the Pacific?

Mr Dobell: Again, I think I'd put it into, if you like, the hard power frame. If you want to think about what are the areas of contest in terms of the geo strategic environment we're in, we are thinking about those levels: military, diplomatic, economic. It seems to me that the areas where we're probably just waking up, where we're just starting to get our game together, are in the areas of information, media and in a sense the values argument. In the South Pacific the values argument is one of the areas where we start miles ahead. It's the one area of the new strategic environment we're facing where we have not really yet responded. We've upped it in other areas. We ensured that even while Australia was slashing its aid budget everywhere else in the world at least the aid budget in the South Pacific, although it dropped in terms of real terms, maintained and increased in dollar terms. So even the aid budget has been going up. The one area where we haven't really realised what sort of new environment we're in is in the area of information communication and disinformation, grey zone and values.

CHAIR: Mr Dobell, we're close to concluding this hearing, but I do want to exercise my prerogative and ask a last question. I noticed in your paper, and I was quite intrigued by this, that whilst you support an increase in the funding for international broadcasting you suggest it should be placed with a new body entirely, so a new Australian international broadcasting corporation that you say should be created. It has its own distinct corporate identity and then it doesn't get I think tied up into the politics of the ABC, if you like. Can you expand a little on why you think we'd need to have a separate entity and a separate institution to do this well and effectively?

Mr Dobell: Yes. Thank you for that. That's a very good question. I speak first of all as a guy who had 33 wonderful years at the ABC—most of them working for the international service Radio Australia and as a foreign correspondent—and who understands and loves the ABC as a unique Australian institution, an extraordinarily valuable institution. This has informed the submission that I put to the soft power review, and which went into an ASPI report we put out in late 2018 on hard news and free media and Australia's soft power.

The thing about the ABC is that its charter gives us two responsibilities and any management or military command theory will tell you should never have more than one command or one commander. The ABC has been torn by the fact that it has tried to do those two charter responsibilities: firstly as its role as the domestic ABC and secondly as its role as the international ABC. As you've heard in terms of the budget, as much as it's striven it has not been able to deliver that second charter responsibility. We can debate who has the most blame for that. Various governments of both colours have punished the ABC over recent years for being the ABC.

But to come to the point: what I've been talking about is this—and in fact I've actually changed the name of it since I put in the submission; I think we need an Australian International Media Corporation, not an Australian International Broadcasting Corporation. That moves it even further away from the ABC. But I think, if I had my druthers, it would be set up as a separate corporation under the ABC—the ABC Act entitles the ABC to create separate corporations—and you'd be looking at an Australian international media corporation that obviously had the ABC, had Radio Australia and had some international television. But then you'd be bringing in—to use a wonderful phrase—'team Australia'. On the board, you'd want SBS. You'd want National Indigenous Television; the role of the Indigenous Television service is very important in terms of the set of cultural relationships we have with the region. You'd be looking at getting the commercials involved. You'd be looking at giving a seat on the board to the vice-chancellors of Australia's universities. You'd be looking at a seat, maybe, for Austrade. And that's the sort of new, platform-neutral, international media effort you'd be seeking to fund. And then you'd be looking at all the coproductions to do. You'd be looking at partnerships with really interesting new ideas in Australia, like the Nielson foundation on journalism, which I think is really wonderful—bringing the American model of a charitable institution and bringing it in to gee up journalism.

Then I think the other thing you'd do—and this is where it starts to get controversial—is that I'd look at the old BBC World Service model, and I'd say: nobody pays, and nobody wants to pay, for good foreign policy, and the ABC is not going to pay for good foreign policy; the ABC is going to worry about Australia, which is what it
should do. So, if you really want an instrument that's about Australian foreign policy, the Australian international media corporation should be funded through foreign affairs.

I think the BBC World Service model has changed a bit. The BBC World Service for many years got its funding through the foreign office, and it was an incredibly good model because it took the money from the diplomats and then it went out and made their life hell. And that worked for the BBC and it worked for Britain, and, in some ways, the World Service is probably still one of the most important brands that Britain has. To be immodest about [inaudible] Australia, Radio Australia—despite all of the damage that it's had; despite the incredible running down that it's had—just goes to prove that journalism is one of your cheapest power weapons because Radio Australia is still highly regarded in the region. You'd want Radio Australia to be part of that sort of reenergised, rebuilt digital audio, feeding into apps, feeding into FaceTime, feeding into Facebook—in a sense, a platform-neutral media operation focused on the South Pacific and further afield on South-East Asia, with enough money to run language services. You'd be thinking first about Tok Pisin and you'd be thinking about other languages, but you'd probably be thinking pretty quickly about how quickly we could gun up, again, our Indonesia service—how quickly we could have a set of very good phone apps on every Indonesian phone, given that every Indonesian I know has got about three quality phones, better than I have. That's the sort of information space you'd be thinking about for Australia.

CHAIR: That's a fascinating and very, very insightful answer, Mr Dobell. Thank you so much. I'm sure we could go on for a considerable time, but I'm conscious that we've just passed one o'clock and this was when the hearing was scheduled to conclude. So I thank you for your attendance today, Mr Dobell, and your contributions via submission and to other various government inquiries that've been underway. You will be sent a copy of the transcript of your evidence and you will have an opportunity to request corrections to any transcription errors.

I now declare this public hearing to be closed.

Subcommittee adjourned at 13:04