



**SOFT POWER, PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND
THE ROLE OF THE PUBLIC BROADCASTERS**

Asialink Public Luncheon

By

MARK SCOTT
Managing Director
Australian Broadcasting Corporation

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Soft Power, Public Diplomacy and the Role of the Public Broadcasters

The Media and the Message

In the final months of 1989, East Germany was a sprawling dysfunctional mess; bankrupt and demoralised, the many promises of socialism had been broken long ago. The State was under heavy pressure from Churches and citizens whose demands for reform were growing daily.

Poland had held free elections, Hungary's border to Austria had been opened. East German protesters were in the streets wanting greater freedom and the removal of travel restrictions.

To buy some time, the East German government decided to announce a modification to travel restrictions. East Germans would be permitted to file applications for permanent exit... to take place in the future.

Making this announcement at a press conference, Politburo spokesman Gunter Schabowski read from a long document. A reporter asked when this change would take effect. Though uncertain, Schabowski - still looking through his documents - said Immediately.

Apparently, that wasn't the timetable he was meant to announce, nor were its implications those he intended.

Reuters first broke the news saying that GDR citizens could now leave by any border crossing point. Then Associated Press stated that the GDR was opening its borders. East Berliners, who were not watching the official East German news – the State broadcaster's news was regarded as propaganda – saw the lead story on West German TV's evening news: the wall was now open.

From that time on, East Germans began turning up en masse at checkpoints up and down the Wall. Under pressure, with no orders and only media reports to go on, checkpoint guards threw open the gates.

By the end of that November night in 1989, Berlin had been reunited, a new Europe was on its way, and the Cold War was over. To paraphrase Victor Hugo, an invasion of armies might be resisted, but not an idea whose time has come – and the media delivered that idea that night.

Now Berlin Walls don't come down every night. But we now live in a post-Cold War world in which soft power and public diplomacy have assumed a hugely important role in foreign policy.

Just as on that historic night, nothing can speak to so many or shape public perception on such a scale as the media.

And the reason that people in East Germany turned to West German TV that night also remains true – they wanted a credible, independent voice.

Australia's International Broadcasting

So – I want to talk today about international broadcasting.

About how much editorial independence matters in international broadcasting.

About the appropriate role for international broadcasting in public diplomacy and the exercise of "soft power".

And I want to talk about how a public broadcaster, like the ABC, gives us the best possible means – with Radio Australia and Australia Network – of representing Australia’s international interests through broadcasting.

The ABC has been reflecting Australia, taking its ideas and values to the world for over 70 years. Radio Australia started broadcasting from Sydney in 1939, when Menzies was first Prime Minister. It moved to Melbourne the next year; apparently the cost of real estate in Sydney at the time was prohibitive. Prime Ministers and Governments come and go, but complaints about the price of Sydney real estate are eternal.

The ABC ran an international television service Australia Television in the 90s. Following a recommendation made by the Mansfield Review of the ABC, it was sold to Channel 7 in 1997. They later shut it down. One small setback for Seven, a giant one for Australia’s interests in the Asia-Pacific region.

In the wash-up, DFAT agreed in 2001 to fund a new international television service, ABC Asia-Pacific Television. While its name has changed to Australia Network, the service has expanded rapidly over the past few years. It’s now seen in 22 million households in 44 countries across Asia, the Pacific and the Indian sub-continent.

With seventy years in radio, and almost a decade running a successful international television service, the ABC’s experience as Australia’s international broadcaster, and the relationships it has established with its international broadcasting partners and audiences cannot be emulated.

These Australian services are a sign to our regional neighbours in Asia and the Pacific of our determination to engage with them.

But they are also a sign of something larger, of how Australia lives up to the promise of freedom of expression, of an open, democratic way of life.

Like the ABC itself, RA and AN are financially dependent on Government. Yet, just like the ABC’s domestic services, they are clearly editorially independent of Government. Independent in statute, independent in policy, independent in practice.

Their reputations and credibility have been built on countless convincing examples of that independence over many years.

Goodwill for these ABC services is helped by development projects we conduct, through ABC International Projects, in association with AusAID. We have current projects supporting the national broadcasters of Cambodia, Vietnam, East Timor, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, and the media as a whole in Solomon Islands. We also have a 14 country Pacific media support project underway.

This alliance of Australia Network, Radio Australia and ABC International Projects constitutes a powerful and positive force that each day is helping advance Australia’s strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific.

Public Broadcasters & Public Diplomacy – A Natural Fit

In the past two decades, there’s been a real increase in international focus on the use of public diplomacy to advance national interests in a globalised, information-rich world.

Public diplomacy is prominent in the foreign policy toolset not just of major powers – China invests heavily in public diplomacy and has placed it forefront of its foreign relations – but also smaller nations.

By helping to develop a positive reputation for a nation in other countries, it also helps achieve foreign policy and trade objectives, including attracting overseas investment, students and tourism.

The Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee's 2007 inquiry into Australia's public diplomacy activities noted "the importance of public diplomacy is particularly evident where traditional diplomacy is not working or relations with another country have soured."

By its nature however, international broadcasting differs from other public diplomacy tools in several important ways.

First, as it employs mass media, it is the most cost-effective means of influencing foreign publics, and reach large numbers of people on a daily basis. Far more, in fact, than any other public diplomacy mechanism. At this point you might be thinking Well, he's a media person, of course he would say that.

But here's an example. A survey of Australia Network audiences in the Pacific conducted in 2009 found that an average of 55% of adults in urban areas reported they'd watched Australia Network in the previous week. What other means of public diplomacy has that reach?

Secondly, international broadcasting allows rapid responses to changing situations in a way that scholarships and cultural exchanges, for instance, cannot.

During the Indian student crisis, Australia Network quickly provided a counter to sensationalist reporting in the India press, broadcasting a more balanced version of events throughout India.

The coverage, which took the form of news stories and longer-form interviews with key figures, was accurate, open and honest and, as a result, credible. What other means of public diplomacy has that impact?

Joseph Nye famously defined "soft power", not as a substitute for military or economic power, but a useful adjunct to it. "A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries want to follow it", he wrote "admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness."

Nye suggested that one of the ways soft power works is through presenting "an attractive culture, ideology, and institutions." And international broadcasting, as an instrument of soft power, is the most efficient and effective way to present Australia's culture, ideology and institutions.

A Government's willingness to fund a public institution like the ABC which determinedly holds Government to account, seems to me a powerful expression of Australia's democratic values: a symbol of a belief that independent journalism is essential to a free society.

It shows that Australians do not just preach democratic ideals, but live them. And it shows the limits to Government power in democratic societies.

By representing the values of the Australian people and the Australian way of life – rather than the Government’s views - the ABC makes the most meaningful contribution to Australia’s public diplomacy.

That alignment of values is set out in the preface to the ABC’s Editorial Policies which states that “the ABC is committed to fundamental democratic principles including the rule of law, freedom of speech and religion, parliamentary democracy and equality of opportunity - it is through the prism of these values that the ABC regards the world.”

The ABC Charter directs the Corporation to broadcast news, current affairs, entertainment and programs of cultural enrichment to countries outside Australia that will:

- (i) encourage awareness of Australia and an international understanding of Australian attitudes on world affairs and
- (ii) enable Australian citizens living or travelling outside Australia to obtain information about Australian affairs and Australian attitudes on world affairs.

The Lowy Institute for International Policy recently conducted some research into international broadcasting. It will soon be published. Looking at ten different services, it found most major government-funded international broadcasters have similar public diplomacy obligations to the ABC in their legislation.

The research also noted – and this is significant – that no matter how different their political, ideological or cultural foundations, no international broadcasting services were outsourced by their governments.

With commercial media available everywhere, why has the link between public diplomacy and public broadcasting lasted all this time?

It’s not as though public broadcasters were insulated, for instance, from the outsourcing fever that swept public institutions at the end of the 20th century, when many non-core activities came under question. Fleet management, I.T., H.R? Maybe. International broadcasting? Never.

The work has been kept in safe hands for the very good reason that public broadcasters have not just expertise and experience, but also the reputation for editorial independence that best matches these responsibilities.

International broadcasting is not just another department of the media business. It’s worth asking if the entrepreneurial talent, daring and risk that give you an edge in commercial media are also the right credentials for the world of public diplomacy.

In running a commercial media service, you can have both the liberty and the habit of aligning your editorial agenda to suit your commercial agenda - as various print outlets or Fox News do for instance. This is perfectly acceptable commercial practice.

In doing so, the Board of News Corporation is serving its commercial shareholders just as it’s expected to. Meanwhile, the Board of the ABC is expected to do its duty on behalf of its stakeholders, trustees working in the interests of every Australian.

The Lowy Institute report looked into the kind of credibility that matters most in international broadcasting. It identified five elements that international broadcasters need to make the most effective, lasting contribution to their country's broader public diplomacy goals.

1. credibility built on independence
2. financial security
3. legislative protection
4. strategic direction
5. and longevity.

"Credibility", says the report, "stands out as the single defining factor which can enhance and guarantee the broadcaster's reputation...for independence".

Hard won over time, proven continuously rather than simply asserted, it's precisely this credibility through which Australia Network and Radio Australia have cemented their excellent reputations throughout the Asia-Pacific.

DFAT, in its submission to a 1989 review of Radio Australia, stated "We see it as fundamental to Radio Australia's reputation that the Government be able to assert to the governments of neighbouring countries that Radio Australia is beyond the editorial or programming control of the Australian Government."

Twenty one years have passed since DFAT set out that requirement – and the passing years have not diminished that need for independence.

Any organisation aspiring to the job of international broadcasting needs that credibility. And it needs to be able to demonstrate two clear lines of editorial separation to qualify for it.

The first line of editorial separation is between Government and the broadcaster. The second is editorial separation between the broadcaster and any commercial agenda.

One qualification is not enough. Both are essential. An international audience has to know that what they're seeing and hearing has not been influenced by any political or commercial interests.

The only permissible influences are accuracy, fairness, the free expression of and diversity of views, impartiality – which just happen to be the editorial values of the ABC itself, to which we are held accountable daily.

Asia-Pacific Media Markets: Today, Tomorrow

Australia Network's target markets are becoming acutely competitive. There's been an increase in domestic media activity, a substantial expansion of commercial and government-supported international broadcasting. Carriage fees on satellite and rebroadcast platforms are rising as a result.

China, France, Germany and Japan have all introduced additional services in Asia and the Pacific in the past 18 months. Other nations are expanding their services in the region. This is the site, after all, not just of Australia's strategic and economic interests, but of 21st century power.

With digital and mobile technologies on the rise, television services are no longer enough. Regional audiences increasingly expect content on demand and via mobile devices with smaller screens. Mobile devices are already the dominant form of internet access in some countries.

However, digital technologies also create considerable opportunities – both for lower-cost distribution, and to tailor content to specific audiences, and to the platforms of their choice.

Our news and current affairs programs are, of course, integral to Australia Network and Radio Australia. Each network is regarded in Asia and the Pacific as a credible and reliable source of news and information from a uniquely Australian perspective.

In Fiji for instance, Radio Australia's news and current affairs are the credible alternative to news filtered through official censors. In every country where there is no media capable of challenging Government, Radio Australia is there. People trust it, rely on it.

With technology limited yet growing, with more limited access to services, and a strong demand for educational content, the Pacific region wants what every market in the Asia-Pacific wants - depth, breadth and quality in entertainment, sport, information and language services - not just in news.

The ABC does however, clearly have advantages in regional news coverage. Asia Pacific News Centre (APNC) currently provides 24-hour television, radio and online news coverage of Asia and the Pacific for international audiences to both services.

It has some 60 editorial staff, including reporters in the field, such as the APNC's Pacific news correspondent Sean Dorney, with long experience of filing for both television and radio.

The centre's multiplatform, multilingual rolling coverage of the devastating Pacific tsunami and Sumatra earthquake at the end of September 2009 showed its great potential. That coverage included the detail on Australia's aid response and reports from eyewitnesses and ABC correspondents on the scene.

Australia Network itself provides comprehensive news reporting from and for the region, including six 30-minute news bulletins per day, news analysis and business programs.

It draws on over 30 ABC editorial staff in eight bureaux across Asia and the Pacific. It has its own dedicated foreign correspondents in Beijing, New Delhi, Jakarta and the Pacific.

And by augmenting the APNC with journalism out of our new ABC 24News service, AN's news service will become even stronger.

I would stress though, that even so impressive a news service is not a trump card in international television. Global TV news services have grown from one channel— CNN—in 1980, through eight in 2000, to a dozen in 2010. They're all competing with hundreds of dedicated local and regional news channels.

No one is crying out for yet another service devoted exclusively to news. Meanwhile, Australia Network stands out as the only one showing news from an Australian perspective.

Our regional platform providers tell us time and time again that the interest in and success of Australia Network stems from the breadth of its schedule. They want to carry the service because their audiences want that mix of genres.

And this range of programming enlarges Australia Network's impact as it reflects Australian culture to the world. The dramas, sport, entertainment, movies and lifestyle, even children's programs work well for us as a point of difference in the market where news channels are a dime a dozen.

But they also work well for us as a nation, as audiences develop a more complex understanding of who we are as Australians – a picture that goes beyond our civic life to our cultural interests. Giving our international neighbours a chance to share in the Australian emotional experience builds empathy. It helps create a goodwill that is beyond the power of government – the goodwill of the national spirit.

Our news services, for example, showed the remarkable transition from Prime Minister Rudd to Prime Minister Gillard that symbolised the maturity of Australian democratic life – or at least political change with only metaphorical bloodshed. But those other program strands might just better explain why who wins Masterchef matters more to Australians than who wins the Federal election debate. And why the leaders' debate had to be shifted to avoid that timetable clash on television.

The Future

At the moment, DFAT is considering what happens next with Australia Network. They're deciding if the provision of international broadcasting should go through a commercial tender process.

While we've never been able to make assumptions or have any certainty about the service beyond five years, I'd still like to suggest that ABC International, which includes Australia Network, Radio Australia and International Projects has an important future ahead of it.

I'm less interested in our limitations though, than our potential. I'm particularly excited about the prospect of the ABC taking public diplomacy, through international broadcasting, into the digital age.

There are so many new ways of reaching out to people in the 44 countries serviced by our broadcasts.

We've learned, from our use of social media, a whole new style of engagement with audiences. And we've learned, from making the ABC available on mobile devices and services, that there are audiences we haven't even begun to reach.

There is so much goodwill, tradition and reputation behind us to build upon. So many opportunities for innovation ahead.

And for all their history and heritage, Radio Australia and Australia Network are on the same current of innovation that's running through today's ABC. Every breakthrough the ABC makes is also then available to Australia Network and Radio Australia.

I am confident that, when Australia's reputation is at stake, international broadcasting by an energetic, independent public broadcaster owned by the Australian people, is the right way to continue.

And I am confident that the job of advancing Australia's international interests is in not just the most efficient and effective, but the safest possible hands.