



**A GLOBAL ABC: SOFT DIPLOMACY AND  
THE WORLD OF INTERNATIONAL  
BROADCASTING**

**Bruce Allen Memorial Lecture 2009**

by  
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**Thursday 5 November 2009  
6.00 pm Macquarie University, Sydney**

I am delighted to be with you and be able to deliver the Bruce Allen lecture at Macquarie University.

As we all know, the ABC is one of the nation's great institutions, playing an important part in the lives of millions each day. It embraces the country with two television networks – soon to be three; and five radio networks, including 60 local radio stations. The ABC has the largest suite of online offerings of any media organization in Australia.

But tonight I would like to look at the responsibility of the ABC beyond our daily experience and beyond our shores – a responsibility made explicit in the ABC's charter. The ABC has a responsibility to not just reflect Australia to Australians, but to reflect Australia to the world.

What is interesting now about this international work is that it comes at a coincidence of two great, interconnected revolutions.

It is almost impossible to overestimate the impact of the global information revolution that is now underway.

The digital revolution places the ability to catch, edit and share media in the hands of anyone with a laptop or smart phone.

And the old gatekeepers of information: publishers and broadcasters who determined what you could read and hear and see, now share the space with millions who film and write and upload and distribute daily.

And this content can reach you, instantly, wirelessly. It finds you where you are and you can experience it as you like.

Information may be power, but now the power is inevitably dispersed. Information is harder to control, with 700 million mobile phone users in China, where 607 billion text messages were sent on China Mobile last year. Or India, where over 400 million mobiles are in use, where there are some 500 television channels, of which 74 are 24 hour news channels.

In Australia, where we can be entertained and amused by the latest iPhone app, it is difficult to appreciate just how transformational cheap, accessible mobile phones can be in communities that have never experienced television, had intermittent radio access and where levels of literacy remain quite low. Hundreds of millions, in emerging middle classes, thirsting for an understanding of the world: for news, entertainment, information, connection.

This information revolution is just part of the broad sweeping global changes underway.

Dean Acheson, the famed post-war American Secretary of State, titled his memoirs, Present at the Creation. He had sat at vantage point to witness remarkable historical events as a reeling world recovered from the Depression and the horrors of World War Two, to drive the reconstruction of Europe, to establish global institutions like the UN and NATO, to manage a nuclear world and ensure a cold war never went hot.

But surely these days will be viewed in similar terms. We are not clamouring out of the massive abject horrors evident in the mid-40s, but the sweep of what we face is truly remarkable and the changes that arise will be revolutionary.

From debates around the framework that underpins the global economy to the challenges of climate; from the threats of rising fundamentalism, to the war on poverty in Africa and Asia and the changing role of global institutions – the stakes have never been higher.

And from our isolated corner of the globe, Australia has never been more connected to all that is happening elsewhere. Conversations in New York, in Copenhagen, in Peshawar have never had a greater impact on our lives. And as never before, we have wanted to have our voices heard, to be recognised at the table. As a nation, we feel we have a contribution to make.

That is certainly the view of the Government. As the Prime Minister termed it in New York recently, we have entered a new era of globalization – globalization of security, globalization of the economy, globalization of the environment and to some extent, globalization of cultures.

These global changes will have a profound impact on us and we are seeking to have influence on them – despite our small population.

Australia is seeking to not only be a participant but a leader in fostering dialogue and co-operation in the Asia Pacific and the wider world. The Prime Minister will host a conference early next month in Sydney to further explore the idea of an Asia-Pacific Community with the capacity to work across political, economic and security issues.

Australia has played a crucial role in creating and nurturing the G20 as the preeminent global institution for economic policy-making and problem-solving. We seem to be proving adept at promoting frameworks for co-operation that stem from Australian interests, values and perspectives.

We have an important role to play in this new world order and we have to use all the tools at our disposal to do so.

And one of those tools, is soft diplomacy.

### **Soft Power in a Hard World**

The advent of the globalised world, married with dramatic technological advances, is forcing governments to rethink old rules.

Philip Seib has observed it is no longer sufficient to woo other governments; their public constituencies are more crucial.

A hostile public undermines friendships between governments, making it difficult to achieve policy goals ranging from trade to defence alliances and creating an environment in which hatred, violence and even terrorism can grow.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Seib (ed), *Toward a New Public Diplomacy* (2009), viii.

The cyber world means nations ignore public diplomacy at their peril. The 24-hour international news cycle and the ability of citizens to use Twitter, mobile-phones and other devices to access information, even in the most repressive climates, can change impressions, images and events in a micro-second.

It may be the Uyghurs in Western China; a citizen's revolt in Tehran; or a random attack on an Indian student in Melbourne. Governments will continue to choose different ways of dealing with these issues. But they can no longer do so without wider public scrutiny and resultant international repercussions.

Part of Australia's challenge in dealing with the Melbourne student attacks has been to counter the intense, on-going coverage of these issues by the dozens of news channels that now operate in India.

"Soft power", as it is termed, is part of the creative diplomatic response to these challenges. Soft power, according to its theorist Joseph Nye, co-opts people rather than coerces them and is the ability to shape preferences.

It is more than influence. It is the ability to entice and attract. Soft power rests on a nation's culture, values and policies.<sup>2</sup>

A key weapon in the inventory of soft diplomacy, of course, is using the same tools that are used daily to reach and connect with billions: to inform, to educate, to entertain. Using the media underpins soft diplomacy efforts. Putting your nation's culture, values and policies on show.

The past 12 months have demonstrated just how hard-nosed the competition can be in the sphere of soft diplomacy.

In January, the German public broadcaster Deutsche Welle launched its second television channel *DW TV Asia Plus* as an English language service promoting European arts, culture, business and politics.

In the same month, the Chinese government announced an ambitious \$8 billion international media program involving China Central Television, the Xinhua News Agency and the People's Daily. An announcement is expected this week that Xinhua's new Beijing-based network, China International TV (CITV), will carry 24 hour news in Chinese and in English for viewers in Europe and North America, followed by Asia and the Pacific late next year.

In February this year, the Japanese public broadcaster NHK relaunched its *World TV* service as an English language news channel covering Japanese as well as international affairs with a focus on the Asia Pacific. The French public broadcaster, France 24, announced the launch of an English language television channel in Asia alongside its present French language channel.

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph S Nye Jr, 'Public Diplomacy and Soft Power' *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, March 2008, 94-95.

And in September, another French publicly- funded broadcaster, TV5 Monde, launched its third channel in the Asia Pacific targeting North Asia as well as Australia and New Zealand. Russia TV has launched across Asia while Al Jazeera is now available in Fiji, Indonesia, Hong Kong and Vietnam.

The action is not only in our own backyard.

The UK Government boosted funding for the *BBC World Service* in 2007, giving it an additional 70 million pounds to support the launch of a Farsi channel for Iran.

To give some sense of perspective, that increase, about \$150 million in Australian dollars, exceeds the total annual Australian commitment to international broadcasting through our international television network, Australia Network – and our radio service, Australia Network, by a factor of almost three.

The ABC operates *Australia Network* television on behalf of the Department of Foreign Affairs and is now broadcasting in 44 countries in the Asia Pacific and passing through some 22 million homes. The cornerstone of *Australia Network's* content is a news and current affairs service provided by the ABC, supplemented by broad Australian entertainment content sourced from all networks – and of course, sport.

*Radio Australia* has been run for 70 years by the ABC and has a network of 11 (and soon to be 15) twenty four hour FM stations in almost every Pacific capital. In addition, further FM stations have been established in Cambodia and Laos.

The network broadcasts on digital radio in Singapore. Radio Australia also broadcasts on shortwave in Mandarin, Indonesian, Khmer, French and Tok Pisin. Vietnamese is online in the newly launched site bayvut.com. And next week *Radio Australia* begins broadcasting in Burmese, its eighth language.

We may be a significant, strategic player in the G20, but our investment in broadcasting is meagre in comparison to our colleagues.

The UK spends \$868 million dollars on the BBC World Service and BBC World News; France over \$600 million on international television and radio services France24, TV5 Monde and Radio France Internationale. Germany ranks next with \$532 million; China currently commits \$380 million to CCTV's offshore channels as well as China Radio International – expanding rapidly - and Japan spends \$226 million on NHK World and Radio Japan.

Australia, with \$34 million covering the cost of *Australia Network* and *Radio Australia*, is at the other end of the table, about the same spend as Mexico and Brazil and 50 per cent smaller than Singapore.

*Australia Network* spends nearly 47 per cent of its budget on content. Its general entertainment budget of \$2.6 million would struggle to make three episodes of a quality Australian drama.

Enticing and attracting is core business for international broadcasters. By crafting content and schedules, working on effective distribution and marketing, audiences

are attracted and engaged. That content reflects the values and aspirations of the culture that produces it.

The mission of France24 is to cover international news from a French perspective and promote French values throughout the world. The channel invests in in-depth analysis to explain complex events.

French perspectives to international events are conveyed through diversity of opinion, debate and confrontation of viewpoints.<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of NHK World is to present broadcasts with great accuracy and speed on many aspects of Japanese culture and lifestyles. The brief includes recent developments in society and politics, the latest scientific and industrial trends and Japan's role and opinions regarding important global issues. The aim is to foster mutual understanding between Japan and other countries and to promote friendship and cultural exchange.<sup>4</sup>

What is interesting is not only the scale of these investments, but their focus and intent – which is squarely to Australia's north. They represent an attempt to build a presence, for a voice to be heard, to entice and attract at in the very heart of what will be the Asia-Pacific century.

And what we need to do is to take advantage of all the opportunities we have as a nation to share the Australian story – our proximity, the depth of our insight and understanding into this part of the world as well as our experience as broadcasters in the region – to ensure our voice is heard clearly and strongly amidst the increasing clamour.

### **The Role of the ABC**

The ABC has a long and proud engagement with the Asia Pacific region –links that extend back to the dark days of 1939, when Prime Minister Robert Menzies launched the overseas shortwave service *Australia Calling*.

Attempting to counter the information being spread by antagonistic foreign broadcasters, Menzies declared memorably “The time has come to speak for ourselves”.

Different times triggered different priorities. *Australia Calling* morphed into *Radio Australia* and in the Cold War climate after 1945, the ABC leadership stubbornly insisted that the service could not exist as a mouthpiece of government. It would need to demonstrate its editorial independence to survive.

That tradition endures.

The famed American journalist, Edward R Morrow said of public diplomacy that "to be persuasive we need to be believed, to be believed we need to be credible, to be credible we need to be truthful".

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.france24.com/en/about-france-24>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/english/info/aboutnhkworld.html>

The Australian model of international broadcasting has not been state broadcasting: the mindless chanting of Government propaganda. It has been believable, credible, truthful. It has been scrupulously independent.

As Editor-in-Chief of the ABC, I feel it is important to state that the values of a nation as expressed through its journalism is an important facet of public diplomacy.

If the values of journalism in a nation include rigour, independence, fairness, accuracy and impartiality then those values will be reflected in its content broadcast throughout the region.

The *7.30 Report* and *Insiders* are broadcast throughout the Asia Pacific on Australia Network television. These programs and networks are supported by the public purse and yet the political leaders in control of that purse are regularly interviewed in robust exchanges critiquing government policy.

This is public diplomacy at work. The values of transparency and accountability are core Australian public values and they are on display in the interviews with political leaders. It is a showcase for Australian democracy: fair, transparent, robust, intense. Democracy that works and endures.

The Federal Government has quite specific objectives for this television service to the Asia Pacific.

*Australia Network* must be credible, reliable and an independent voice in the region. The service must present through its news, information and documentary programs, a 'window' on Australia and Australian perspectives on the world.

It should project images and perceptions of Australia in an independent, impartial manner; foster public understanding of Australia, its people and its strategic and economic interests; and raise awareness of our economic and trade capabilities.

This is a contemporary statement of the value of public diplomacy.

It also is a statement that matches the values of the ABC.

Reliability and credibility are at the heart of our obligation to the Parliament and to our audiences.

The ABC's international footprint through *Australia Network* extends to Korea and Mongolia in the north and India and Pakistan to the east. In the Pacific, we stretch as far east as the Cook Islands.

It is a remarkable achievement on a mere \$20 million a year.

*Radio Australia* has been talking with our neighbours for seventy years and has been reporting for the nation and the region in some of the Asia Pacific's most intense struggles.

In many parts of the Pacific, struggling for credible, independent robust media – Radio Australia is the authoritative source of news and current affairs – from the region, for the region.

The third, often overlooked but rapidly expanding, feature of the ABC's international commitment is *ABC International Projects*.

In Papua New Guinea, the Solomons, Vanuatu, Cambodia and Vietnam, *International Projects* are partnering with local media corporations to build corporate, business, editorial and infrastructure skills. This work is entirely self-funding with support from agencies such as AusAID and the World Bank.

It has proved invaluable to us in building irreplaceable faith in trust in the ABC's international brand.

## **THE FUTURE**

The ABC has undertaken a rigorous review of its international performance and assessed the challenges ahead. It has come to the firm view that to meet those challenges it needs a bold agenda.

This blueprint acknowledges the need to combine its two international broadcasting arms into one strong brand. The power of the single, clear, unambiguous global brand is shown by such international broadcasting powerhouses as the BBC and CNN.

The ABC has already taken some steps down this path. In November last year, we created the *Asia Pacific News Centre*, combining the *Radio Australia* and *Australia Network* news teams under one editorial management.

This has created a formidable cross-platform unit, capable of providing breaking news coverage across television, radio and online and utilising the experience of staff with expert knowledge of the beats they are covering.

And with the ABC's online leadership and innovation, we would be able to take great content and deliver it seamlessly, under the one banner, on television and radio, online and mobile, using our expertise in podcasting and internet catch-up services like iView, to make it available to the largest possible audience.

The new integrated brand would help spearhead a more vigorous approach to international broadcasting in keeping with Australia's global ambitions.

Some may question the role of radio in all of this. For more than 50 years, it has operated in the shadow of flashy television offerings. But as the ABC's domestic experience demonstrates two things powerfully -

Radio endures. It is cheap to receive. It is wireless. It is portable. For the audience it is engaging and personal. Despite all the other media on offer, from an array of television channels to your iPhone apps – the ABC's radio share is growing.

And; radio is stronger when it works alongside television and online. To ensure content is delivered in the most appropriate medium, to cross-promote programs, stories and talent, to maximise efficiencies by repurposing content to different outlets.

Some may also question whether we can compete globally with our content, whether you need to spend so much to make any impact at all.

Our answer would be an emphatic yes: our voice can be heard and even more so with reasonable additional investment. Already we are having impact – reaching an aspiring middle class in the region who are internationally focused, who value education, who aspire to develop their skills in English. Those with whom we want to work and who will be increasingly influential.

But with greater investment – we can make and purchase more compelling content, and purchase distribution that will make our services available in tens of millions of more homes. We are only beginning to scratch the surface of our potential audience.

And our partners on the G20 – those who we would want to sit alongside in terms of global influence: the French, the Germans, the Italians – are showing no reluctance to make the investment necessary.

The blueprint for Australia's future as an international broadcaster has four distinct stages.

It is based on the reality that market expansion can only occur with a boost to all three media pillars – content, distribution and branding.

Australia has done very well with its limited investment so far in international broadcasting. Radio Australia plays a vital role in the Pacific and we are growing the footprint of Australia Network there significantly. By investing more in transmission we can effectively be available free to air in every home with radio and television in the Pacific – and take advantage of the growth of content on mobile phones.

And as a nation, we need to be aware that if we do not take advantage of the transmission opportunities that exist at this point in the Pacific, then other countries, such as China are showing no such reluctance. As we focus on our broadcasting and project work in the region at the ABC, we never ceased to be amazed by the level of Chinese investment in all aspects of Pacific infrastructure, including communications.

In India, our initial forays into six key markets with Australia Networks have brought pleasing audiences –at times out-rating both the BBC and CNN where we go head-to-head. But unlike those two global giants, *Australia Network* will never have automatic entrée onto the satellite and cable platforms because of the audiences we bring. To expand, we will need to make the financial investment to purchase the kind of distribution we need.

By boosting the funds available for content, the ABC would be able to become the dominant regional provider of news, information and English-language learning material. We predict that with expanded distribution, this new integrated service

could extend its television reach into Asia, the Pacific and the all-important Indian market by nearly 200 per cent by 2013.

In stage one, we would look to significantly enhance Australia's media presence and footprint in our own Asia-Pacific backyard. The ABC would expand the service's regional news-gathering capability with five additional news bureaux. This would give the service a total of 14 bureaux in Asia, the Pacific and India – more than either CNN or the BBC - and firmly establish us as the pre-eminent source of news and current affairs about and for the region.

In our sights are the two biggest regional markets – China and India. We are intent on secure the all-important “landing rights” for the service in China. And we are conscious of the need to significantly expand our presence in what is now the third largest television market in the world, in India.

The second stage would provide an expanded footprint into aspirational households and decision-makers in 53 countries in Africa and 22 in the Middle East, with additional news bureaux and Arabic-language audio content for radio and online.

The third stage rollout to Latin America would require carriage on a new satellite, but open the doors to another 21 countries.

A different tactic is needed for the final stage in Europe and North America with its overcrowded and expensive subscription television markets. In these areas, the integrated ABC service would seek to leverage its broadband delivery systems, giving Australia a truly global platform to promote itself.

It is an ambitious blueprint, carefully structured to permit a staged rollout. And one fully cognizant of the need for new, transparent accountability mechanisms to ensure that every dollar is spent for maximum impact.

But even a doubling of our existing effort adds up to less than half of the budget of Baz Luhmann's Australia. And for that money, we would be able to showcase the best of Australia, our news, sport and entertainment, our values and our culture, our democracy, round the clock, day in day out, in tens of millions of homes, across the region, across the world.

In our view, a relatively modest investment, certainly in comparison to the vast sums being spent by our fellow members of the G20, would yield immediate, tangible benefits.

The ABC proposal is not just about expanding our influence in our own back yard but protecting it. Is it perhaps a question of not whether we can afford this expansion but whether we can afford not to be present in this way.

We cannot abdicate our role as an independent credible voice in the region. Our own independent voice helps assert that we are neither a puppet of the United States nor an extension of the old London-focussed Commonwealth of Nations. We need to speak for ourselves and not let others speak on our behalf.

The ABC does not pitch this project in the belief that it has an automatic inherent entitlement to an expanded service. However, it contends there are powerful persuasive reasons why it is best-suited and equipped to manage this ambitious international broadcasting agenda.

- The ABC has established cross-platform capability. Continuously since 2001, it has successfully provided an Asia Pacific television service and, for the last 70 years, has broadcast in multiple languages on *Radio Australia*. The aim is to develop this capacity to deliver a fully-integrated international service with television, radio, online and mobile content.
- The ABC is a clear innovator in online and is equipped to develop the international service in this space. Already we can build on the back of Australia's largest suite of online services, Australia's first internet player for television content, iView, and ongoing innovation in providing mobile services and exclusive broadband content.
- The ABC has demonstrated multi-lingual skills, with *Radio Australia* soon broadcasting in eight regional languages daily and *Australia Network* subtitling in regional languages to service its growing audiences.
- The ABC has an international reputation for depth, credibility, expertise and reliability. In our reporting of Australia to the world, we draw on more reporters locally and nationally than any other broadcaster. The recently-established Asia Pacific News Centre brings together some 60 journalists who work on reporting on the region for the region online, on *Radio Australia* and on *Australia Network*. This is arguably the largest editorial group covering Asia and the Pacific. ABC reporters such as Sean Dorney in the Pacific have acquired a level of expertise and access that is unmatched.
- We have strong regional relationships. The ABC has arrangements with over 530 content distributors in Asia and the Pacific. These relationships, which have been nurtured over time, are built on trust and confidence in the quality of programming. It is important to stress that some of these relationships are particular to the ABC and are not easily transferred. For example, in negotiating landing rights for *Australia Network* in China, the Chinese authorities have made it clear that they are exploring a relationship solely with the ABC. And other Governments and broadcast partners know that when the ABC walks in the door, there are no other agendas or business relationships operating as a sub-text. We have no other commercial interests or ambitions but this work we are doing on behalf of the Australian people, our 100 per cent owners.
- The ABC has an enviable record in English-language learning – a popular feature of our programming. The ABC is second only to the BBC in the production of highly-quality English-language learning content for delivery to international audiences.

- The ABC has regional goodwill built on its international project work as we work with Governments and public broadcasters across the region, providing technical and professional support to build their capacity.
- And finally, the ABC's has a capacity for nimble and efficient deployment of resources. In reaching 44 nations in the region for less than \$35 million a year, the international service is delivering true value for money. With more investment, there is so much more we can do.

There is another important factor – public accountability. While editorially and operationally independent of government, both *Australia Network* and *Radio Australia* represent a significant public investment in public diplomacy objectives.

When you look at the expansion of international broadcasting as an arm of soft diplomacy, Governments are using their public broadcasters to do this work. You shouldn't outsource your diplomatic efforts.

It is a very specific brief. The ABC is well-versed in the demands of parliamentary and taxpayer scrutiny. Its Act leaves it free of any commercial agenda that could conflict with its public duty role.

Australia has already had an unhappy experience when the Seven Network took over the international television service for a period of time, but was unable to make the return it wanted and did not seek to renew the licence. The ABC stepped in and took over in 2001.

With more than 70 years experience in international broadcasting and doing the work that is central to our history, to our charter, to our expertise: to our core mission – we are here for the long term.

Reflecting Australia to the world, without conflicting commercial objectives, requires credibility, a track record of effective engagement, and an ability to be diplomatically deft, without sacrificing key attributes and values of quality journalism.

In my view, the mission can only be delivered by your ABC.

Once more we are present at the creation of a new world order and it is remarkable to be a country so prized with opportunity and potential.

We are part of the region that will become the centre of the world's growth and focus. We have a seat at the table where the economic future of the planet will be shaped. We are resource rich, economically stable, with political, financial and judicial institutions that are robust, credible and stable.

With everything going for us, we need to ensure the world knows and understands Australia.

We need to ensure our voice is heard.

**We need to continue to put Australia on display, using the most powerful tools available – the tools of modern communication.**

**And at the ABC, we are willing and ready to play our part.**