



Australian Government

Department of Infrastructure, Transport,  
Regional Development, Communications and the Arts



Australian Government

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

# Indo-Pacific Broadcasting Review

## Maximising Australia's broadcasting investments and opportunities in the Indo-Pacific region

November 2023



# Executive Summary

The Australian Government has committed to reviewing the potential restoration of shortwave radio, options to continue the PacificAus TV program, and options to maximise the impact of Australian taxpayer investment in the Indo-Pacific media context. The Review has been conducted in partnership between the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts, and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Findings and recommendations have been informed through targeted consultation with stakeholders both domestically and within diplomatic posts in the Indo-Pacific region and help inform a picture of the current landscape in a constantly changing and evolving environment.

The Indo-Pacific presents both opportunities and challenges for Australia to maximise its investments in broadcasting in the region. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), as a national broadcaster, plays a crucial role in building media partnerships across the region and boosting Australian content internationally. While the reinstatement of shortwave radio would not be a cost-effective option as a mass media platform, further investment in alternative service technology and partnerships may present new opportunities for continuing to reach audiences across the region.

The Government's investment in the PacificAus TV program has delivered on its aims and there are opportunities for further expansion. Greater use of Special Broadcasting Service's (SBS) content and capabilities may add value to Australia's international broadcasting activities.

The Review's key findings and recommendations are outlined below.

## Potential restoration of an Australian shortwave radio service in the Pacific

The ABC ceased shortwave transmission to the Pacific in 2017. During the Review's consultation process, submissions noted the unique advantages of shortwave radio transmission but highlighted the cost of re-establishing a Pacific shortwave service, the growing Pacific audience preference for other platforms (FM, AM and digital services), the uncertainty of shortwave's future, and the potential for emerging technology to match shortwave's advantages.

There would be considerable costs associated with reinvesting in shortwave and, as the Pacific's digital transition continues, there are a relatively limited number of shortwave listeners. Currently there are no technologies that match all shortwave benefits. Shortwave radio remains potentially valuable in some parts of the Pacific, but Australia's investments would be better targeted at technologies and channels that are most preferred by Pacific audiences.

There is merit in the ABC cooperating with Radio New Zealand (RNZ), including through the ABC and RNZ's existing shortwave radio arrangement, to maintain connection with existing shortwave listening audiences in the Pacific.

**Recommendation 1:** Do not pursue the reinstatement of Australian shortwave broadcasting in the Pacific unless there are significant changes in costs, audience preferences, or other priorities that alter the current value proposition.

If reinstatement of the technology were to be pursued in some form, further consideration and investigation of a range of factors would be required. This includes seeking expert technical advice on the most cost-effective solutions for transmission capability and the optimal transmission locations.

**Recommendation 2:** Prioritise investment in broadcasting services that meet the needs and preferences of Pacific audiences, as demonstrated by audience research.

**Recommendation 3: Support the ABC to increase its existing arrangement with Radio New Zealand in order to maintain connection with audiences listening to shortwave, while continuing to acknowledge and respect the ABC's operational independence.**

## Maximising the impact of Australian investment

### SBS

There are opportunities to maximise the Government's existing investment in the SBS including by better utilising the SBS's in-language content for relevant audiences in the Indo-Pacific. It is important to note that the SBS Charter enables it to cover domestic distribution, rather than international, which is a barrier to fully maximising its potential. There is merit in making greater use of the SBS's content, capabilities and cultural connections to regional audiences. It will be important to ensure that this complements, rather than competes with, Australia's existing investments, including with the ABC and PacificAus TV. Issues relating to rights and availability of content will also need to be considered.

There is merit in investing in the ABC's capacity to strengthen its own existing services, to enable it to harness SBS content where it is relevant and appropriate for the target audiences.

#### **Recommendation 4: Pursue a greater role for the SBS in Australia's Indo-Pacific broadcasting.**

A greater role for the SBS in Australia's Indo-Pacific broadcasting activities could include:

- Encouraging the ABC to continue to work with the SBS to acquire content and enter into content-sharing arrangements, particularly in relation to audio content in languages relevant to Indo-Pacific audiences (noting that programming decisions are a matter for the broadcaster).
- Regular government engagement with the SBS about priority Indo-Pacific nations and/or language groups for content generation, and what additional government support may be required.
- Consideration of the most appropriate model to enable greater access to SBS content in South and Southeast Asia, and what additional government support may be required.
- Including SBS and NITV content in the PacificAus TV programming slate.

### Screen content production and co-production

There is appetite from partners for more co-production activities with Australian media, which can support capacity building within the region, as well as providing soft power benefits. Co-productions should include financial, technological and skill-development support, to enable genuine participation with regional partners.

Submissions to the Review noted the importance of providing clearly defined objectives for co-production activities and recommended appropriate models to meet the differing needs of Indo-Pacific countries and regions. Submissions also noted advantages in pursuing official co-production treaties, which can provide incentives for increased collaboration between media organisations and can assist in securing distribution agreements into other territories and regions.

**Recommendation 5: Support co-production as a capability and capacity development mechanism in the Indo-Pacific region.**

Options to consider may include:

- Funding for a grants program open to media organisations from Australia and the Indo-Pacific.
- Support for the ABC and SBS to develop co-production models tailored to differing needs throughout the region as a pilot program aimed at co-producing high-quality content suitable for domestic and regional use.

## Regional media development initiatives and direct grants

Australia's longstanding investment in Pacific regional media has made a strong contribution to improving journalist capacity. There is a clear need for media development activities to continue.

In the Pacific, regional media development initiatives could be maximised by providing additional bilateral funding, including, for example, for infrastructure and equipment upgrades. There would also be benefit in increasing opportunities for Pacific media to co-produce high-quality local content (both news and entertainment).

In Southeast Asia, there is appetite for more Australian engagement in the media sector such as through expanded English language syndication of news; regional media training courses and visits; support to build media and digital literacy, including identifying and countering mis- and disinformation; and joint production, particularly in entertainment.

Across South Asia, there are gaps in the availability of Australian content, despite appetite, and the potential to highlight people-to-people links in Australia's large and growing South Asian diaspora.

**Recommendation 6: Australia should deepen its media connections in the Indo-Pacific region and could complement its existing regional media initiatives with targeted bilateral funding, including for grants or co-production.**

- Across the Pacific region, there is a need for continued support for the media sector. Australia could maximise the impact of its existing regional media program with further targeted bilateral support, including with small grants and opportunities to co-produce high-quality local content (both news and entertainment).
- In Southeast Asia, there is a need for agile funding to support regional media needs, including through English and native language media products, as well as training and development programs for regional journalists.
- In South Asia, Australia should focus on building media linkages with the aim of increasing content syndication that showcases our people-to-people ties and common interests.

## PacificAus TV

The PacificAus TV program has successfully delivered on its intended aims, as evidenced by audience research and through grant reporting and performance reports. Feedback from Pacific broadcasters is very positive, including on the potential for expansion.

During the Review's consultation process, contributors expressed that commercial television networks have established good arrangements for the distribution of content to the Pacific region, but more focus and

expertise in making content specifically for Indo-Pacific audiences is required. Contributors also highlighted the merit in broadcasting original content in partnership with regional broadcasters, as well as expanding the content slate to include SBS and ABC content. Contributors also proposed alternative administration models to the current program.

Free TV Australia has successfully managed the PacificAus TV program, exceeding the contracted hours of Australian content required to be broadcast in the Pacific.

#### **Recommendation 7: Renew investment in PacificAus TV**

Audience research has proven that the program has delivered on its aims of amplifying Australia's voice in the Pacific.

- The program has achieved its objectives and feedback from Partner Broadcasters has been positive.

#### **Recommendation 8: Further expand PacificAus TV into more Pacific nations**

Tonga and Samoa were successfully added to the initiative in 2021. Positive feedback from broadcasters indicates this could be further expanded into other nations.

#### **Recommendation 9: Investigate options to expand content slate for PacificAus TV**

There has been interest in further content from both current Partner and potential future broadcasters of PacificAus TV.

- Explore the diversification of PacificAus TV programming through content from the ABC and SBS/National Indigenous Television (NITV).
- Require the provider of PacificAus TV to include SBS-generated content, including First Nations content, where there is an interest to audiences in the Indo-Pacific region.
- Explore opportunities to expand access to additional nations.

#### **Recommendation 10: Review program delivery arrangements after two years**

Review of the program delivery arrangements should occur at the half-way point of the Indo-Pacific Broadcasting Strategy four- year implementation period to determine if the existing delivery model remains fit for purpose, including reviewing the roles of Free TV, the ABC and the SBS.