

## Submission by

### **The Australia Asia Pacific Media Initiative (AAPMI)**

to the

### **Joint Parliamentary Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade**

### **Inquiry into strengthening Australia's relationships with countries in the Pacific Region**

AAPMI, formerly Supporters of Australian Broadcasting in Asia and the Pacific, thanks the Panel for the opportunity to make a submission.

#### **Who is AAPMI?**

AAPMI is an expert group that came together in the national interest in 2018 to provide a submission to the Review of Australian Broadcasting in Asia and the Pacific and the Review of Soft Power. Members include media executives, journalists and technologists with decades of experience as well as other expert, academics and members of Australia's Pacific and Asian diaspora communities. Media industry members have worked at the highest level in Australia and the Indo-Pacific region in commercial and public roles. AAPMI has members in most Australian states and territories and supporters in 10 countries including Indonesia, Timor-Leste, Papua New Guinea and many in the Pacific.

Our immediate aim is to build a bi-partisan and cross-media-industry consensus on the need for a significant step-up in Australian media in the Pacific and Asia utilising innovative partnerships with regional media and the latest technology.

***Disclosure:** Members of AAPMI including but not limited to signatories to this document work across the Pacific media landscape including with commercial, public and community organisations.*

#### **Executive Summary**

This submission recommends the rebuilding of Australia's media voice in the Pacific and Asia utilizing television, radio and digital platforms and a significant injection of funds into Australia's media development work to ensure Pacific media survive the current digital disruption and are able to play their important accountability role.

#### **Key points:**

Media debate and quality journalism are vital to development, democracy and good governance in the Pacific and to Australia's interests in the region and its Pacific Step-up.

However, the potential of media as part of the whole of government effort to deepen and co-ordinate Australia's Pacific initiatives has been seriously overlooked as has the role of the Pacific diaspora (including Australian South Sea Islanders) within media.

Media has the ability to amplify and sustain every aspect of Australia's engagement and partnerships in the region and it has been identified by Pacific governments and the people of the region as a priority. In a fast-changing and uncertain post-COVID-19 world this will only be more important.

As Dame Meg Taylor, Secretary-General of the 18-nation Pacific Islands Forum put it:

*“As the Forum's largest and wealthiest member, Australia has the unique capability of reaching all Pacific people on a daily basis, **if it chooses to**. As such, with the right engagement, Australia is able to attend to the needs of Pacific people in a very frequent and meaningful way.”* Emphasis added by AAPMI

In the past five years the contest of ideas between China and developed democracies in the Pacific has been intensifying. The COVID-19 pandemic has seen this accelerate. COVID-19-induced lack of trust in China and the perception the US may no longer be a strong and reliable partner has generated an additional layer of uncertainty in the region.

The scale of medical misinformation about the coronavirus circulating within communities in the Pacific and fears it has sparked, have highlighted the vital role of the media in providing accurate information in any crisis – political crises as well as health crises and natural disasters.

***It is now urgent that Australia steps up as both a media player and as a development partner supporting the capacity of quality, independent media in the Pacific region.***

The significant increase in the audience for the ABC in the Pacific over the past two months, as it reported on the health and economic dimensions of the pandemic and the response to cyclone affected Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji and Tonga, is evidence of the depth of trust that Pacific nations have for that institution and as a result for Australia.

Unfortunately, just as Australia and the region needs it most, the ABC's funding for its international service is at its lowest ebb since world War II and its services are limited.

Australia is also highly-valued for its reputation as the Pacific's main provider of support for capacity development for Pacific public interest media. However, this area of support, too, has suffered from significant lack of funding in recent years. Quality public interest media is an essential pillar of democracy and has a crucial role to play in explaining issues to the public in challenging times, but Pacific media is in a fragile state. The combination of the impact of digital disruption and additional loss of advertising revenue as a result of the COVID-19 crisis is creating an existential crisis.

## **Specific recommendations**

### **Based on research by AAPMI experts AAPMI recommends**

- ***The allocation of a total of \$55-75 million per year to ensure Australia has a fit-for-purpose multi-platform media voice in the Asia Pacific region.*** This is one of 3 options discussed below. It would provide full television, radio and digital services across a geographic area stretching from India in the west to French Polynesia in the east. A revitalization of Australia's voice in the region should be done in partnership with public interest media organisations in the Pacific.

- ***An increase in Australia's development assistance to build the capacity of Pacific public interest media to at least 0.6% of the development assistance budget***, in line with global standards. As a proportion of the Pacific development budget of \$1.4 billion in 2020 this would amount to \$8.9 million.

## **A rebuilt Australian media voice in the Pacific**

Australia is living in the most geopolitically complex times since WWII with a global contest of ideas between China and developed democracies, evidenced by increasing state-sponsored misinformation campaigns as well as challenges from online extremist propaganda. At stake for Australia are both its interests (security, international law, trade etc) and its values (democratic vs. authoritarian models). The challenge is both immediate and long-term. AAPMI recommends the rebuilding of Australia's media voice across the Asia Pacific region and this should start in the Pacific.

A diverse media is valuable. Chinese media can be an important part of the mix if it is genuinely free and independent. However, this is not generally the case and Chinese state-owned media is expanding. Some examples of China's media expansion in the Pacific in recent years include

- the large number of Chinese state-controlled English language services in television (satellite and local broadcast), radio (FM and shortwave) and online
- Chinese government media campaigns around its COVID-19 assistance, its assistance in response to TC Harold and its naval and medical ship visits program
- a push by Chinese state-owned media to sign additional broadcast MOU's with Pacific media companies and to encourage Pacific outlets to preference their coverage of last year's protests in Hong Kong
- an expanded Pacific-based network of Chinese correspondents (e.g. Xinhua has a Suva correspondent while there are no Australian correspondents based in Suva, or anywhere else in the Pacific outside Port Moresby)
- a more comprehensive Chinese government visits program for Pacific journalists and strong attendance by Chinese representatives at key regional media events
- Chinese state-owned media has assumed control of Radio Australia's former Pacific shortwave frequencies
- advertising and placement of sponsored Chinese state-controlled content in English language newspapers in the Pacific
- during the Australian election campaign Xinhua provided the only reporting of Shadow Foreign Minister Penny Wong's headline foreign policy speech to appear in the Fiji media
- Expanding Chinese language media in the Pacific

***In this new era of uncertainty Australia needs to mobilise every policy instrument it has available to ensure the Pacific is peaceful, stable, prosperous and secure.*** The media is a natural 'fourth policy pillar' to any platform aimed at good and long-lasting regional ties. As Australia increases its defence co-operation, diplomacy and aid as part of the Pacific Step-up, so must it increase its support for its independent public interest media voice and for quality Pacific media. Media magnifies all aspects of Australia's engagement with the region and in so doing provides a uniquely powerful 'soft power' tool which supports the national interest. Media has an important role in saving lives during natural and health disasters and as such is a vital tool in ensuring the widely-defined security envisaged by Prime Minister Scott Morrison and other Pacific Forum leaders when they signed the Boe declaration in 2018.

***Australia's contribution to free and independent media both through its own media and support for Pacific media demonstrates Australia's values***, including political freedom, free speech and liberal democracy. Media Freedom in the Pacific is under increasing challenge as outlined in the statement from the Melanesian Media Freedom Forum 2019. Since the start of the COVID-19 crisis there has been an increase in threats to media, including more  censorship. It is noteworthy that PNG has slipped 8-places to 46 in the 2020 World Press Freedom Index while Tonga

and Fiji have also moved downwards. Australian media, the ABC in particular, have for decades supported media in the Pacific facing threats including by breaking important Pacific stories passed on to them by Pacific media and whistleblowers unable to publish due to local pressures. With current underfunding this is now not always possible. While Australian governments will not always like everything the media reports, their willingness to submit to scrutiny reveals much about the openness, transparency and confidence of our society and as such is an important asset.

***As part of the Pacific Step-up there has been cross-party support for greater engagement with the Pacific.*** Prime Minister Morrison has talked about this in terms of a personal commitment to prioritise Australia's 'Pacific family'. Media has a unique ability to facilitate a conversation within that family every day, in remote areas as well as national capitals. It reaches diverse audiences, including those sceptical about Australia and engages people on topics beyond the contentious debates of the daily news agenda. An enhanced Australian media voice in the region would explain the views of Australia and Australians and deepen dialogue across the region. Without a daily, ongoing, open and multi-layered conversation reaching all the people of the region we cannot truly be said to be connecting as 'family' and the Step-up will fail to reach its intended audience.

***Harnessing stories, community connections and the creative talent of Australia's Pacific diaspora, the Australian South Sea Islander (SSI) community and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is an essential part of having a multi-layered conversation with the region.*** At present Australia's Pacific diaspora is underutilised by Australia's media. For the purposes of this inquiry South Sea Islanders should be considered part of the Pacific diaspora. As Australian descendants of Pacific Islanders from more than 80 Pacific islands who were kidnapped or recruited in the 19th century for work as labourers in Australia, South Sea Islanders have strong and growing links with their homelands which can be better leveraged to add depth to Australia's relations with the region. South Sea Islanders have family connections in Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, PNG, New Caledonia, Fiji, Kiribati and Tuvalu. Within the region there is also a keen interest in stronger links with Australia's indigenous communities including through media and stories told by media.

Media and broadcasting have a unique ability to reach millions of people in the Pacific each day. If properly funded, ***the combination of radio, television and the growing myriad of online and mobile manifestations that are an integral part of 21<sup>st</sup> century media give media unmatched reach.***

***The power of that reach is enhanced with the trust audiences place in media they know to be operating in the public interest*** – a trust media outlets earn over years by demonstrating independence from vested interests. A rebuilt service based around joint content-creation by Australian and regional media would create a conversation of benefit to the Australian and regional audiences and provide a very practical antidote to perceptions in the Pacific that Australia sometimes has a paternalistic attitude. Co-productions and other forms of joint content creation are an ideal vehicle to show a modern Australia embedded in the region, inspiring hearts and minds with compelling content of a wide range of topics (from news and current affairs to science, technology, business, culture, health, agriculture, children's programs, drama, English language lessons and more).

***Independent studies have shown quality public interest broadcasting is a cost-effective means to reach Pacific audiences.*** As such, media is a value-for-money proposition in deepening the impact of the Pacific Step-up. At present, the ABC spends around \$11 million a year on its 24-hour radio, television and digital services to Asia as well as the Pacific. In the Pacific it provides daily bespoke radio current affairs programs in English and Tok Pisin. FreeTV Australia (representing free-to-air commercial stations) has been allocated \$17.1 over 3 years to deliver 1000 hours of programs (approx. 5.5 weeks of programming) to the Pacific. The total allocation for media is small-change compared with Australian defence and development programs in the region.

***Australia's media voice in the region has never been weaker at a time when it is most needed.*** Budget cuts in 2014 saw the ABC's international service lose 60 per cent its funding and many of its essential services to the region. Prior to the cuts the ABC was the leading international broadcaster in the Pacific. There are now 10 Pacific Island Forum states that no longer receive the ABC's bespoke Pacific current affairs programs and no media is bringing all Pacific Islands Forum nations together to debate public policy issues. ABC television is available in all Pacific countries but it provide a more generic service that does not cater to specific needs of the Pacific audience.

***The potential of the media is being overlooked by policymakers.*** Prior to the budget cuts, a landmark Lowy Institute report found governments from both sides of politics had failed to grasp the importance of either public diplomacy or international broadcasting. Similarly, broadcasting was not mentioned in the Foreign Policy White Paper 2017 chapter on 'soft power'. Despite DFAT's recent Soft Power Review, there has been no serious attempt yet to scope the effective rebuilding of Australian media in the Asia Pacific. The recent report of the Review of Australian Broadcasting Services in the Asia Pacific failed to grapple with the crucial strategic and diplomatic issues at hand preferring to focus on obstacles to media such as an unwillingness on the part of audiences to pay for these services.

***Pacific governments, inter-governmental organisations, academics and media companies have called for the rebuilding of Australian broadcasting, in particular ABC broadcasting*** in the region, and for more support for Pacific media to play its important role in democratic processes. As Vanuatu's then-Prime Minister Charlot Salwai put it in a submission to the 2018 Review of Australian Broadcasting Services in the Asia Pacific "My government hopes that ...the ABC is supported to begin anew the process of re-engaging with audiences across Vanuatu".

***Other nations are expanding their international media, China dramatically so,*** with a plan to redraw the global information order using every tool available from involvement in laying fibre optic cables and support for developing country media to the agenda of its own state-owned media outlets and those owned and controlled by entities with links to the Chinese Communist party. The UK government has embarked on the biggest expansion of the BBC World Service since WWII with an increase in funding of £85million per year, a decision Prime Minister Boris Johnson re-affirmed recently through his support for the report 'Global Britain: A Blueprint for the 21st Century'. Japan and other G20 countries are expanding their services as are other key media players in the Pacific including New Zealand and Qatar (Al Jazeera). More details are available in the AAPMI (formerly Supporters of Australian Broadcasting in Asia and the Pacific) submission to the Review of Australian broadcasting in the Asia Pacific.

***Australia's international broadcasting is dramatically underfunded compared to OECD peers and other players in the region.*** Figures for China are not available but with AUD\$9.3 billion announced in 2009, and more since, it is seen as a significant threat to democratic values and free media in the Pacific region and beyond. A recent report by the Lowy Institute found that while the UK spends AUD\$7.05 per capita per annum on international broadcasting, France \$6.34 and Japan \$4.58, Australia spends just \$0.66. AAPMI believes Australia should significantly step up its multi-platform broadcasting and media presence (digital/online, television, radio) across Asia as well as the Pacific, as recommended below.

***Australia has existing assets and reputation which, despite their weakened state, could easily and cost-effectively be rebuilt.*** No country or media organisation is offering significant partnerships for joint content-creation in the Pacific. Such partnerships are necessary to talk "with", not "to", the region. Australia is uniquely well-placed to develop this capacity and build on New Zealand's well-funded and innovative Pacific initiatives (which are mostly focused on Polynesia rather than the whole region including Melanesia and Micronesia as well). In the past year, the ABC has stepped up its services to the Pacific from within its allocation for international broadcasting of \$11million a year, instituting new programs and a Pacific music competition. It also received some additional funding to take Q+A to Fiji for the first time, a move that was widely acclaimed in Australia and in the region. Since the COVID-19 crisis began the ABC has increased its coverage of the implications of the pandemic, particularly on social media. The ABC has

also been working closely with Radio New Zealand, sharing information and transmission and supporting each others efforts for a wider audience across the Pacific. The value of the ABC as an existing Australian asset is seen in the statistics which show that since the COVID-19 crisis began ABC Radio Australia's Facebook page has earned 1.9 million impressions, seen a 45% increase in engagement and a 22% increase in video. However, this additional output is not sustainable without an injection of new funding and it is clear that by any measure \$11 million is inadequate to provide the comprehensive media service Australia needs. For example, the ABC's Tok Pisin service for Melanesia currently has just 2 full time staff who produce a daily radio current affairs program, online content and additional projects, such as those during the COVID-19 crisis. Budget cuts in 2014 resulted in the sacking of all non-news division English language program-makers and the axing of their programs for the Pacific.

***Significant injection of funds will be needed to rebuild a credible voice in the region.*** AAPMI estimates a comprehensive service in a geographic area stretching from India in the west to French Polynesia in the east would cost around \$2 dollars per Australian per year in addition to current spending. See below for more details on three options developed by AAPMI.

Given the scale of the project to revitalize Australia's media voice in the region, AAPMI believes funding should be provided as a new policy proposal and ***not*** from existing funding for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade or the development assistance budget. When the Australia Network contract with the ABC was terminated in 2014 the government saved AUD\$196.8 million. Although the Australia Network contract was funded through DFAT none of that money returned to that department when the contract ended. It is widely acknowledged that for decades DFAT has been under-resourced.

To be sustainable into the long-term a revitalised Australian public interest media presence in the Pacific region will need bi-partisan political support and support from across Australia's media industry. With that in mind AAPMI has held constructive talks with Minister Alex Hawke and other members of the government, with shadow ministers, independents and minor parties and with an array of media industry bodies including, the ABC, SBS, NITV, FreeTV, independent and Asia Pacific diaspora producers. AAPMI members have also been involved in philanthropic initiatives such as establishing the Sean Dorney Grant for Pacific Journalism in conjunction with the Walkley Foundation.

***AAPMI has prepared a set of guiding principles for renewed Australian media presence in Asia and the Pacific.***

We believe any international service should

- 1) be contemporary multi-platform media providing quality public interest content
- 2) be culturally, linguistically and technologically appropriate to audiences
- 3) be editorially independent of government and business interests
- 4) offer opportunities for the involvement of all Australian media including
  - a. public media
  - b. community media, including Pacific diaspora, South Sea Islander and indigenous media
  - c. independent producers, including Pacific diaspora, South Sea Islander and indigenous media
  - d. commercial media
- 5) offer contestable funding for content creation
- 6) create and disseminate content responsive to, and developed in partnership with, regional media

The ABC international services have always showcased the best Australian content available from all outlets, including commercial networks and independent producers. The ABC currently airs the Seven Network's AFL coverage and other programs and programs from SBS.

**Funding and recommended options for rebuilding Australia's media voice in the Pacific and Asia**

In 2010, Australia spent \$36 million dollars annually on international broadcasting including transmission costs. In today's dollars, adjusted for CPI, this is the equivalent of \$43 million. At that time a Lowy Institute study found:

*“Australia’s international broadcasters have been operating in a policy and financial environment which has impaired their ability to keep pace with these transformative (technological and geopolitical) developments. ... Australia’s funding of international broadcasting still falls considerably short of that of its international counterparts.*

In 2020, Australia expects to spend far less: \$11 million via funding for the ABC and approximately \$5.7 million via FreeTV Australia.

Unlike many other nations with strong international broadcasters, Australia is located in a region of rich diversity and rapid change. It is a region in which our neighbours will not necessarily share our world view. Strategic competition and the contest of ideas in Asia and the Pacific is intensifying making this committee's inquiry timely.

In preparing our recommendations members of AAPMI have consulted current and former media executives in Australia and the region and those with years of experience in publicly-funded international broadcasting and with commercial operators.

As noted earlier in this submission the BBC World service is undergoing its biggest expansion in 70 years, with additional funding of \$AUD 164 million per year (£85 million). If Australia were to allocate a similar increase to its international broadcasting (proportional to Australia's population) it would amount to more than \$50 million per year. Australia's voice in the region is being rebuilt from a significantly lower base than the BBC World Service.

Three options are suggested ranging from a full international broadcasting and digital service across the Pacific and Asia (option 1) to a small project for enhanced service only to PNG, the Pacific, Timor-Leste and Indonesia (option 3). ***Option 1 is recommended and might be achieved using a stepping-stone approach starting with option 3.***

Funding proposals for the three options have been developed by AAPMI experts based on published research, our experience as media industry insiders and consultation with current and former media executives from international broadcasting corporations (both commercial and publicly-funded). Given the lack of available open-source information they are ballpark estimates.

The options are:

- 1) **Full Asia-Pacific television, radio and digital services** \$55-\$75 million per annum (including current funding). This option would significantly enhance services in the Pacific, Timor-Leste and Indonesia, near-neighbours among the developing nations of ASEAN and Mandarin-speakers globally, including in Australia. At its most effective (with a budget around \$75 million), this option could include tailor-made services for audiences in India. This option would include a wide range of programs made specifically for Asia-Pacific audiences with priority on news and current affairs (including arts, business, sport, science and technology), new English language-learning programs and children's programs. In any of these options news and current affairs would meet all the ABC's rigorous guidelines for independence. This option would enable the rebuilding of audiences in Asia and the Pacific and see Australia achieve its soft power goals by re-establishing a significant voice in the region.
- 2) **Budget Asia-Pacific television radio and digital services** \$40-\$55 million This option would enhance services in the Pacific, Timor-Leste and Indonesia. Services for near-neighbour developing nations of ASEAN

and China would be enhanced but without as much bespoke programming for audiences in each country as noted in option 1. Bespoke services for India would be beyond the range of this option. Considering the requirement for more streaming, mobile and online services in 2020 and beyond, satellite delivery of television would probably not be an option under this scenario.

- 3) **Television, radio and digital in Papua New Guinea, the Pacific, Timor-Leste and Indonesia** \$35-\$50 million per annum. This option would provide for significantly enhanced radio and television content and access to digital platforms and transmission in the countries identified as priorities in the 2016 Defence White Paper i.e. PNG, the Pacific, Timor-Leste and Indonesia. At its upper funding-level this option would provide services of a standard similar to Option 1 (above) but over a more limited geographic area. At its lower funding-level it would provide services at slightly lower level to Option 2. Funding for this option recognises that establishment costs do not scale proportionately with the geography covered by the service as maintaining services in the Pacific is comparatively costly.

## Why Australia needs to increase development assistance for the public interest media in the Pacific

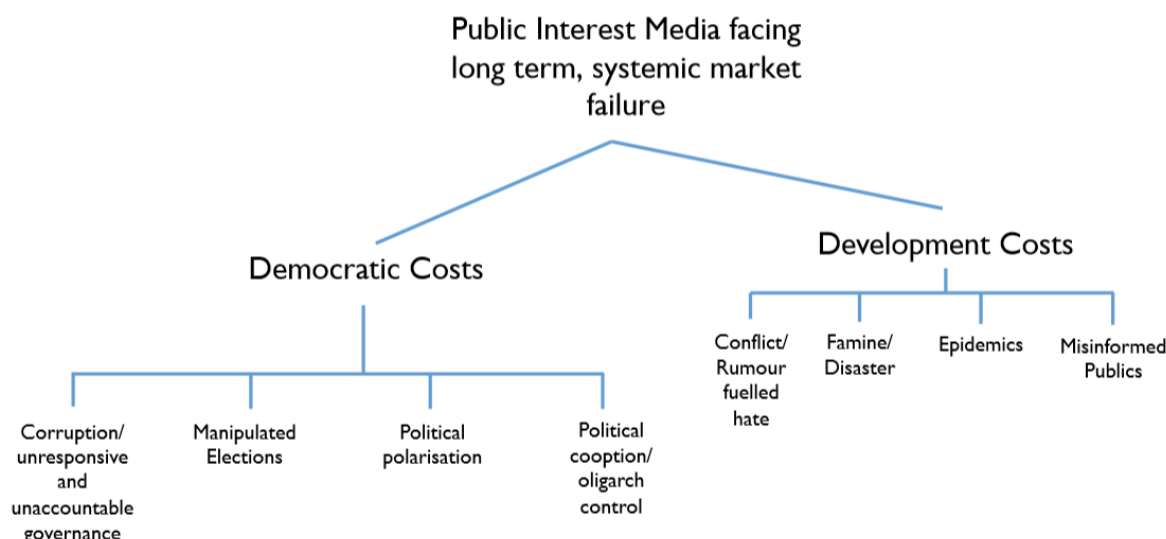
### The context

The value of independent media coverage for awareness of activities within Australia's development program is important. However, far more important is the central role public interest media plays in the success of those development programs.

Without informed and engaged citizens the prospects of achieving the aims of any development program or the Sustainable Development Goals are remote. The role of the public interest media in holding the powerful to account, providing accurate and unbiased information, raising awareness about national issues, giving voice to citizens (including disadvantaged citizens) and engaging them in debate is vital to the success of all development assistance, whether it be disaster preparedness and relief, health emergencies like COVID-19 or longer-term programs such as those promoting inclusive economic growth, better health or education, gender equality etc. Countless examples such as this recent editorial from the Samoa Observer illustrate the value of the media in development and the complexity of the task it faces.

In the Pacific journalists and media leaders are speaking out about increasing threats to media freedom and the insidious effect this is having on the ability of media to play its public interest and accountability role. The pressure on media freedom comes as advertising revenue and funding for journalism organisations shrinks and the cost of carrying out independent journalism escalates. It is widely acknowledged that the business models available to public interest media are disappearing as advertising revenue flees to digital platforms which do not pay for the journalistic product they publish. It is estimated that news media globally will lose around \$23.8 billion in annual advertising revenue between 2017 and 2021 – mainly to the FAANGs (Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google) and other digital platforms. As the Global Forum for Media Development notes 'The consequences of this decline for the prospects for democracy, development and good governance are dire'. See diagram below.





**Source: Global Forum for Media Development**

Public interest media in the Pacific is facing an existential threat. A combination of increasing limitations on media freedom and loss of revenue to the global platforms such as the FAANGs (Facebook Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google) has created a perfect storm. Without support from development partners and philanthropic organisations many will not survive as has been seen in Australia and New Zealand with the recent closure of provincial newspapers, TV news bulletins and magazines.

In the Pacific, the full impact of digital disruption is yet to be felt but it will be particularly dire. At the moment, media diversity and local ownership is strong, but profitability is weak. There is a very real risk that public interest journalism may not survive, giving more voice to extra-regional players. Australian development support will be needed for business-model transition as well as for the enhanced capacity development of public interest journalism if the Pacific media is to have the capability to play the accountability role that is needed into the future. The COVID-19 restrictions have shutdown local businesses across the world which have in turn cancelled advertising, causing media outlet revenues to plummet. The Pacific is not expected to be isolated from this downturn.

### **Current global and Australian funding for Public interest media development**

In the Pacific, Australia has been and is looked to, as the main provider of capacity-building for public interest journalism development – in many cases the only significant source of capacity-building. While China has ramped up its support for and engagement with Pacific media (through content deals and substantial journalism training and visitor programs), other development partners, foundations and philanthropic organisations provide little more than piecemeal contributions.

Sadly, despite the Pacific Step-up, Australia has seen a significant cut its overall spending on public interest media development in the region in the past decade and has reduced the number of countries to which support is provided. The Pacific Media Assistance Scheme ([PACMAS](#)) and the Media Development Initiative ([MDI](#)) in PNG, both managed by the ABC, are the flagship programs. As the most recent Independent Progress Review of PACMAS noted ‘the need to strengthen media capacity is outstanding in the region’. PACMAS and MDI are effective, value-for-money programs that provide capacity development to enable Pacific media to play its accountability role and facilitate debate on a wide range of issues including Australia’s key development objectives. Other innovative programs include [Pacific Food Revolution](#) and [Women in News and Sport](#), (which has continued into the media element in the [Pacific Sports Partnerships \(PSP\)](#)). Despite a recent small uptick in funding, especially for media

infrastructure in the Pacific, *Australia's funding is far from adequate*. Details of Australia's budget allocation for public interest journalism are not readily available on the public record. Latest figures show \$8.9 million allocated to PACMAS 2017-2020. Figures for MDI do not appear in DFAT's aid performance report for PNG 2018-2019. In the period 2005-2012 MDI accounted for \$18.48 million. Only part of these programs address public interest journalism as both include significant components for infrastructure.

The inadequacy of Australia's funding for public interest media has a number of dimensions. There is no doubt that with Australia's development assistance at record low levels (and well below the OECD DAC average), there is an urgent need to increase the overall allocation. AAPMI endorses the many voices in the diplomatic, defence and development communities as well as among the general public who are calling for a plan for significant increases. While there are some calls from within Australia for a smaller aid budget this needs to be set against the evidence that Australians believe the aid budget is far bigger than it is in reality. AAPMI also endorses the view that it is not in Australia's interests to fund the Pacific Step-up at the expense of development assistance to Asia.

Australia is not alone in underestimating the value of support for public interest media. Globally, the role of independent, public interest media has been neglected with less than 0.3 per cent of development assistance (USD\$625 million a year) allocated to media capacity building. The Global Forum for Media Development sets 0.6 per cent as a target. This is especially important now, and in the future, as media face digital disruption and nations face new disinformation challenges. The Indo-Pacific is the epicentre of the geo-political contest of ideas. *As Australia is seen as one of the beacons of support for public interest media, Australia should lead the way by increasing its funding to meet and exceed this 0.6% target.*

### **Specific Issues for the Committee in relation to media development in the Pacific**

Australia's assistance to the Pacific has many strengths which could be quickly and cost-effectively leveraged. AAPMI members work closely with media colleagues in the region. We offer the following specific observations and recommendations.

#### ***A content fund to enable Pacific media to collaborate with Australian media on regionally significant stories:***

Developing the capacity of the Pacific media to provide the quality public interest journalism required of the fourth estate can be cost-effectively delivered by providing content funds to enable journalists/producers/media houses collaborate with Australian journalists/producers/media houses. Learning by doing on real stories has been shown to be the most effective way of learning. Grants for content-production would come with mentoring by Australian partners and provide for publication of the story output by both a Pacific and an Australian media outlet. These opportunities would provide high-level development for senior Pacific professionals who would be able to share their skills with more junior colleagues, build relationships between Australian and Pacific media professional and provide the reading/viewing public in the Pacific and Australia with coverage of important but currently neglected issues. A content fund would be an effective vehicle to continue and enhance Australia's role in media capacity development during the COVID-19 crisis as collaboration can take place via video conferencing. A content fund would also offer opportunities to leverage the skills of media professionals in Australia's Pacific diaspora, South Sea Islander and indigenous communities.

***Partnerships with Pacific Organisations:*** One of the key differences between the way China works with media and the way Australia works and demonstrates its values is in listening to the voice of the region and in partnerships with regional and national organisations. These partnerships, which in the Pacific include the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS), Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA), Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Program (SPREP), Pacific Islands News Association (PINA) and national media associations, should be strengthened and

expanded to include more organisations including those in the NGO sector and more inter-governmental agencies. In the Pacific, national media organisations and PINA are on the frontline in defending independence of the media raising awareness of the important accountability role of the media - and so are especially important.

***Longer term support and more innovative delivery modes:*** As funds have been short Australia's development assistance has placed too much reliance on one-off training workshops with little follow-up. Multi-year programs are needed focusing on key themes for which Australia is recognised for its expertise. This would include support to find business models to address issues associated with the digital transition and loss of revenue as a result of the COVID-19 crisis as well as support for capacity development for all aspects of content-making

***PACMAS Training Grants Initiative (TGI) - a model for collaboration and delivery.*** The PACMAS Training Grants Initiative (established as a pilot project in 2019) offers contestable training grants to Pacific-based journalism trainers to deliver journalism training in economic and business reporting with support from more experienced Australian journalism trainers. There has been demand for many years for Australia to offer more roles in its capacity-development delivery to Pacific trainers/consultants. The primary focus of the TGI was on offering opportunities to journalists who successfully completed PACMAS's Train-the Trainer in Economic and Business reporting program. The TGI needs new and ongoing recapitalization and should be extended to be available for all form of media training across the region. As training provided under the TGI utilises in-country trainers it offer an opportunity for Australia to respond to capacity development needs throughout the COVID-19 crisis, despite the unavailability of Australian consultants due to travel restrictions.

***Journalism exchange programs:*** China has made this form of media assistance its own with a wide variety of opportunities on offer. Participants in China's program of short trips (up to 3 weeks) complain they are more sightseeing opportunities than useful skill-building or collaboration. Australia could establish a point of difference by offering exchanges with Australia that respond closely to the needs of Pacific journalists and offering intra-regional exchanges.

***A stronger regional focus in the Pacific.*** Currently the structure of Australia's development assistance programs makes it difficult for Pacific regional training programs to be held in PNG or for journalists from Papua New Guinea to be fully involved in high-level regional training. PNG journalists have a lot to offer as participants in regional programs and as journalism trainers across the region. PNG should be included as a key country for PACMAS and any other regional program in the Pacific. All Pacific Islands Forum nations should be offered significant and appropriately tailored training opportunities through PACMAS.

***Recognising the difference between public interest media and communications strategies.*** AAPMI has received feedback from the Pacific expressing concern that some Australian development assistance-funded media content is patronising and more of the nature of public relations than a real contribution to development. This could be addressed by hiring local media companies with editorial independence to provide culturally appropriate media content (with support from Australian media organisations, if needed). Similarly, complaints have been received about the blurring of lines between communications strategies and public interest media initiatives and the unwillingness of some Australian officials to engage with the media as they undertake their essential role in providing information and accountability. In the more contested geopolitical and information landscape it is more important than ever that Australia demonstrates it understands the principles of public interest media and provides the role-model our partners expect to see.

***AAPMI experts stand ready to assist or meet with the Committee to discuss any of the issues above.***

*Signed on behalf of AAPMI*

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