

ABC Submission on supporting democracy in our region.

November 2022



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1. Introduction

The free media plays a vital role in every successful democracy.

An open and plural information environment underpins good governance and rule of law, creates an enabling environment for fair elections, and fosters the participation of citizens in the electoral process and within their local communities more broadly.

Trusted sources of news and information, like the ABC, promote and sustain democracy by keeping citizens informed, uncovering the facts, and holding power to account.

The ABC today is one of the most recognised and trusted media brands in the Pacific. This was confirmed in late 2021 by research undertaken in the ABC's six key Pacific markets: Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Fiji, Vanuatu, Samoa, and Tonga.

The proportion of respondents who valued the ABC across all its channels as a 'trusted source of news and information' was a very high 75%, comparable to that in Australia.

The ABC in the Indo-Pacific region has long been a tangible and powerful demonstration of the Australian people's commitment to engagement with the peoples and nations of our region, and an investment in building understanding and shared interests.

Today the ABC is ideally placed as a media organisation to further support democracy and an international rules-based order in our region at a time when regional geopolitical developments require Australia's sustained and strategic engagement.

The ABC has the expertise, content, and infrastructure that enables it to engage respectfully with the diverse cultures and communities of the Indo-Pacific region in English and in their own languages, while presenting Australian perspectives and values to the world.

This submission can be read in conjunction with the ABC's submissions to the 2020 inquiry into strengthening Australia's relationships with countries in the Pacific region, and the 2018 review of Australian broadcasting services in the Asia-Pacific.

With sustained, strategic commitment and appropriate resourcing, the ABC stands ready to do more to support our neighbours and Australia's national interest in the advancement of democracy, peace, and security in our region.

2. The ABC in the Indo-Pacific region today

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) has been engaging with the Indo-Pacific region and beyond for more than 80 years. Through radio, television, and digital services, and through

media development support over the past 50 years, the ABC has built a deep and enduring connection with Indo-Pacific audiences.

The ABC’s international broadcasting role is a mandated Charter responsibility as set out in s 6 of the [Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act](#). The current international strategy seeks to deliver the most effective service possible within a funding envelope of \$11 million per annum. It is aligned with the government’s current Indo-Pacific Broadcasting Strategy which includes an additional funding envelope of \$32 million over four years from 2022-23 for content, regional transmission, and media development activities. Details of the full suite of ABC International Services activities can be found in Annex I.

ABC International Services today incorporates two distinct teams with complementary objectives and activities:

- ABC International Broadcast and Digital Services offers high quality content on television, radio, and digital platforms, with a particular focus on the Indo-Pacific region.
- ABC International Development (ABCID) supports public-interest journalism across the Indo-Pacific region, with a focus on the Pacific media.

The ABC’s expertise across traditional and emerging platforms is an important asset. The ABC’s services across the Pacific span multiple touchpoints and platforms to reach audiences far and wide, via the technology they prefer. Across the Pacific audiences are rapidly adopting smart phones as their principal tool for media consumption.

Certainly, the ABC is turned to as a source of rapid and accurate information in a crisis. When riots broke out in the Solomon Islands capital Honiara in 2021, there was an immediate 25% increase in Solomon Islander followers to the ABC Radio Australia Facebook page.

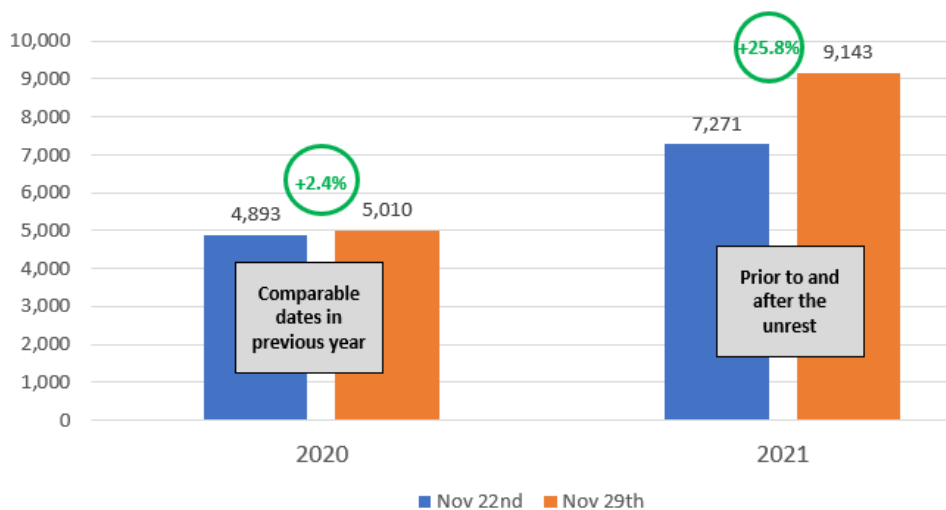


Figure 1: In 2021 when riots broke out in the Solomon Islands capital Honiara, there was an immediate 25% increase in Solomon Islander followers to the ABC Radio Australia’s Facebook page

The ABC continues to innovate to meet audiences where and how they prefer. In August 2022 ABC Pacific was launched as a digital platform to target tech-savvy, English-speaking urban residents of Pacific nations as well as expatriate Australians living in the Pacific, and Pacific diaspora populations in Australia, with the full range of ABC content.

The ABC's content for the Pacific is defined by its commitment to local communities and their needs and interests. On Radio Australia, the flagship daily current affairs program *Pacific Beat* features interviews with Pacific leaders and newsmakers, with broad audience appeal and coverage of local issues. Other programs include *Sistas, Let's Talk* (conversations with inspirational Pacific women), *Wantok* (Pacific-focused news and current affairs in Tok Pisin, Solomon Islands Pidgen and Vanuatu Bislama), *Island Music* and *Pacific Playtime* (for children and families across the region).

The ABC's Asia-Pacific Newsroom in Australia has 50 journalists and producers telling stories in Bahasa Indonesia, Tok Pisin and Chinese, as well as English. All the content produced for Pacific audiences is available domestically, helping to maintain regional ties and building greater Australian awareness about our Pacific neighbours.

ABC Australia is the ABC's international television service, available via more than 100 rebroadcast partners in 38 countries and territories across the Indo-Pacific. ABC Australia is available on partner platforms as a 24/7 channel, plus the ABC offers access to blocks of ABC programs that broadcasters can insert within their own schedules. This option is popular and serves to embed an Australian presence within local programming, showing an Australia that is very much at home in the Pacific context.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) supports the ABC to produce the only pan-Pacific sport-focused TV show, *That Pacific Sports Show*, and a sports-oriented podcast, *Can You Be More Pacific*, hosted by Australian/Pacific sportspeople. DFAT also supports Pacific journalists to tell climate and disaster preparedness stories from their local communities with *Pacific Prepared on Radio Australia* and rebroadcast by six Pacific broadcasters.

ABC International Development (ABCID) contributes to the strengthening of democratic media practice in the region. The ABC trains and mentors journalists and media professionals around the Indo-Pacific, fostering public interest media and democratic values in the process. Between 2020 – 2023 ABCID has trained over 1500 unique participants across the Pacific including PNG, Solomon Islands, Samoa, Tonga, Vanuatu, Palau, and Niue. Through regional partnerships, such as with the Fijian Media Association, ABCID supports media strategy development and skills transfer, with specialist workshops on topics such as budget and elections reporting. The work of ABCID helps to strengthen institutional and community resilience.

3. The role of international media services

International media services are among the most powerful, effective, and immediate tools of statecraft. They speak simultaneously to large numbers of foreign citizens. They amplify other public diplomacy initiatives. It is for this reason that all major and many middle powers invest substantially in these services, often well beyond their own shores.

As Australia's international public interest broadcaster, the ABC is an amplifier of the many aspects of Australia's positive influence in the Pacific.

Through ABC Radio Australia, ABC Australia, ABC digital and social channels, and via its regional content and syndication activities, the ABC models best practice in public interest journalism and bolsters the efforts of local media.

The ABC also exercises influence through thought leadership and participation in regional alliances, such as the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union, which promotes the values of public service media.

3.1 Media in the Indo-Pacific region

The Indo-Pacific media landscape is complex and diverse.

Journalism faces multiple threats including the physical safety and reputations of practitioners and organisations, financial resilience and sustainability, and the pace of digital transition.

Some governments have implemented restrictive legal frameworks to limit journalistic expression. Entrenched political and business interests compete to retain control of the media.

Internal conflict, governance challenges posed by corruption and a rise in civil-military competition can all render journalism a dangerous profession.

The [2022 World Press Freedom Index](#) notes the effect of a “globalised and unregulated online information space” where misinformation, disinformation and propaganda are amplified by the often unchecked and exponential spread through social media. In this context, the rapid take-up of digital technology and access to a diversity of platforms, media products, and experiences leaves audiences in our region particularly vulnerable to [competition for influence](#), which often plays out in the media, [most notably recently in the Pacific](#).

With journalism facing a myriad of challenges and obstacles in the region, support and development for practitioners is a crucial undertaking. The ABC has led this work in the Pacific for decades and is well placed to do more.

3.2 Media development and democratic transitions

Democratic reform is often reliant on the successful development of the media sector. Trusted and responsible local news and information [increases civic engagement](#), community cohesion, and government accountability.

The goal of media development is to support the growth of media away from state ownership and control towards editorial independence, plurality, sustainability, and the public interest.

An international collective of prominent journalists and academics recently [sounded the alarm on the viability of global independent](#) journalist initiatives. Describing the “information chaos of the globalised digital public domain” they called on governments for more comprehensive and sustained investment in journalism as an essential element of freedom of opinion and expression.

“A free and independent media by its very nature occasionally makes life uncomfortable and difficult for governments of all persuasions, but this is what sets countries like Australia apart from those that limit press freedom or curtail basic liberties. It is the strength of a healthy democracy which should be protected and nurtured.”

**ABC Managing Director David Anderson
Opening statement to Senate Estimates
23 March 2021**

International assistance for this agenda in the past has typically included government-funded initiatives as the main driver of reforms, but when donors withdraw, initiatives can, and have, been quickly scaled back or abandoned.

In this context, the ongoing work of ABC International Development with local media to directly build broad-based popular demand for democratic principles and reform remains highly relevant. The ABC as the manager of the long-running [Pacific Media Assistance Scheme](#) supports the development of a professional, diverse and resilient Pacific media that is able to participate in democratic processes, thereby contributing to better governance, and protecting the rules that underpin regional security and prosperity.

The ABC is ideally placed to respond to and support Government undertakings to [integrate foreign policy with other elements of state influence](#) including the pursuit of partnerships grounded in trust and the projection of modern Australia to the region. Australian researchers and academics are also calling for a [genuine, long-term approach](#) to regional engagement and cooperation.

The ABC represents a direct communication line to the peoples of the Pacific. It is [an essential element](#) of the Australian government's commitment to [listen to its Pacific family](#), and a manifestation of Australia's enduring interest and engagement with the Indo-Pacific region.

4. The ABC in the Indo-Pacific future

The ABC would welcome further investment for activities and operations that directly contribute to democracy across the region. It has the skills and capacity to convert funding very quickly into tangible results across these areas:

Bespoke content: The ABC produces bespoke programs across the broadest possible spectrum of content; from award-winning children's education to ground-breaking documentary films, lifestyle programming, to coverage of sport. ABC Australia broadcasts Australian public and commercial television, and commissions and produces unique programming. All our content places Australia in a global context, and supports understanding of Australia's national identity, our values and interests and our democratic way of life. With additional funding from the Government under the Indo-Pacific Broadcasting Strategy, the ABC will create more content which benefits audiences across the region and bring these stories back to Australians at home.

Digital platforms: Consumers increasingly personalise their experience of news and information and this can result in a fragmented and competitive media space. Social media is both a driver of disinformation and polarisation but also, well-handled, a potential tool for building more peaceful and resilient societies. The ABC is constantly monitoring changes in audience behaviour and seeks to invest and innovate to ensure audiences can access quality content across their preferred platforms.

Transmission and re-broadcasting: Access to the internet, social media and digital technology differs widely between countries, between rural and urban areas, and across a gendered digital divide. With additional funding the ABC would explore a greater expansion of FM broadcast networks and transmission, including to new markets in the Indo-Pacific region.

Digital transition: As the largest and best resourced broadcaster in the Pacific region, the ABC already supports partner state broadcasters in their analogue-to-digital transition and digital transformation experiences. This work will need to continue to support regional media agencies and ensure they remain current and viable, and meet the information needs of their audiences.

ABC in Indonesia

In 2021, ABC Australia could be viewed on 9,084,000 televisions in homes, hotel rooms and cafés across Indonesia with an estimated audience of 18,168,000.

[The ABC Indonesian Service](#) provides news, analysis, features, and multimedia content translated into Bahasa Indonesia. In 2021 it had 12,490,447 page views.

In-language programs: Australia can expand its reach in the Indo-Pacific region by increasing the amount of content the ABC produces in local languages and increasing the amount of content which is subtitled in regional languages.

Syndication and Distribution: The Indo-Pacific media landscape is complex. To stay relevant and to project a modern Australia to the region and the world, the ABC needs to maintain an omni-channel presence and keep investing in re-broadcast and transmission agreements.

Political reporting and election coverage: The ABC can further leverage its deep political and election reporting skills to support local media to hold power to account and promote free and fair elections.

Climate change: Pacific leaders have identified climate change as an existential threat and a critical regional priority, including under the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. The ABC can play a greater role in ensuring communities in affected nations receive vital information about climate change and feel connected to each other and other countries across the region.

Emergency broadcasting: The ABC has extensive institutional capability to support local media organisations in the Indo-Pacific region with expanded emergency broadcasting planning, tools, and skills, emergency management operations and coordination with key stakeholders. These capabilities will clearly be needed in coming years.

Public health: The biggest killer of Pacific people is [non-communicable diseases](#) with 80 per cent of all deaths in the Western Pacific caused by diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, cancer and respiratory diseases. Public health reporting is a niche undertaking and of critical interest and importance to the well-being of Indo-Pacific audiences. The ABC has institutional strength and expertise in this field that can be further drawn upon.

Media development: Donor assistance funding and technical support is critical to building the institutional and legal frameworks essential to a robust, independent media sector. The ABC believes there are more opportunities for nimble, responsive investment in media support to the region. Furthermore, while media development assistance is often [focused on training for journalists](#), the ABC's enduring and trusted relationships ensure effective engagement in challenging sector-wide interventions that support the enabling environment for democracy to flourish including support to media leaders, media management and organisational development, equipment, and technical skills transfer for critical transmission infrastructure.

4. Conclusion

The ABC's international media and development services are a national public diplomacy asset. For decades, and through funding cycles and changes of government, the ABC has provided a consistent and trusted resource for regional stakeholders, civil society, journalists and their media organisations, and communities.

These services are a signifier of Australia's commitment to our neighbours and a foundation for broader regional engagement. They connect with audiences via a range of platforms which draw on the ABC's experience and expertise including in climate and emergency reporting, elections coverage, journalistic integrity, gender empowerment, diversity and inclusion, and sport.

The political and media context across the Indo-Pacific region is complex and varied, with nations at different points in their democratic, economic, and digital transformation. The value of the ABC and its role in the promotion and protection of democratic values and institutions in the Indo-Pacific region through the delivery of timely, accurate information from a trusted source is immense.


The ABC works in the region through partnerships. In so doing it reaches and engages with people and communities in many countries, promoting shared democratic values while celebrating and honouring cultural difference.


Sustained, strategic investment would strengthen the ABC's capacity to contribute to democracy, stability, and good governance in the Indo-Pacific region.


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ANNEX I: ABC International Services: Broadcast, Distribution, Content and Development November 2022

	ABC Australia	ABC agent	ABC Radio Australia	Syndication Audio	Syndication Digital News	Syndication Video News	ABCIID	Digital*
PACIFIC								
PNG	X	Bureau	FM TX	X		Planned	MDI, AHP COVID19, WINS	X
Solomon Is	X		FM TX	X	X		PACMAS, WINS, SAFE	X
Fiji	X		FM TX		X	Planned	PACMAS, WINS, SAFE, FIJI AHC	X
Vanuatu	X		FM TX	X	Pending	Planned	PACMAS, WINS, Girls Online (GO!), SAFE	X
Tonga	X		FM TX	X	Pending	Planned	PACMAS, WINS, Girls Online (GO!), SAFE	X
Samoa	X		FM TX		Pending	Planned	PACMAS, WINS, SAFE	X
Tuvalu	X				Planned		PACMAS	X
Kiribati	X				Planned		PACMAS, SAFE	X
RMI	X			X	Planned		PACMAS, SAFE	X
Nauru	X				Planned		PACMAS	X
Niue	X				Planned		PACMAS	X
Palau	X				Planned		PACMAS	X
Cook Islands	X				Planned			X
FSM	X				Planned		PACMAS	X
Fr Polynesia	X							X
Wallis & Futuna	X							X
Tokelau	X							X
New Caledonia	X						SAFE	X
Guam	X							X
Nthn Marianas	X							X
SE ASIA								
Timor-Leste	X		FM TX				AHP Inclusive Disaster Preparation	
Indonesia	X	Bureau, local staff			X		WINS	X
Philippines	X						WINS, PEB	X

	ABC Australia	ABC agent	ABC Radio Australia	Syndication Audio	Syndication Digital News	Syndication Video News	ABCID	Digital*
Singapore	X							X
Malaysia	X							X
MEKONG								
Thailand	X							X
Cambodia	X				X			X
Vietnam	X	X					WINS	X
Laos	X				X		AHP COVID19	X
Myanmar	X							X
NORTH ASIA								
China								Weibo, Wechat
Taiwan	X	X						X
Hong Kong	X							X
Macau	X							X
Japan	X	X						X
South Korea	X	X						X
SOUTH ASIA								
India	X	X					WINS	X
Nepal	X	X						X
Sri Lanka	X							X
Bangladesh	X							X
Maldives	X							X
OTHER								
Mongolia	X							X

	MOUs	In-language content	Infrastructure	Audience Insights	Content funding
PACIFIC					
PNG	X	Wantok: Tok Pisin	5 x TX	Tebbutt (Radio & TV)	TPSS, CYBMP
Solomon Is		Wantok: Pijin	2 x TX	Tebbutt (Radio & TV)	TPSS, CYBMP
Fiji	X		2 x TX	Tebbutt (Radio & TV)	TPSS, CYBMP
Vanuatu		Wantok: Bislama	2 x TX	Tebbutt (Radio & TV)	TPSS, CYBMP
Tonga			TX	Tebbutt (Radio & TV)	TPSS, CYBMP
Samoa		SBS Radio Gagana Samoaan	TX	Tebbutt (Radio & TV)	TPSS, CYBMP
Tuvalu				Ipsos**	TPSS, CYBMP
Kiribati				Ipsos**	TPSS, CYBMP
RMI	X		Satellite dish	Ipsos**	TPSS, CYBMP
Nauru				Ipsos**	TPSS, CYBMP
Niue			Satellite dish	Ipsos**	TPSS, CYBMP
Palau				Ipsos**	TPSS, CYBMP
Cook Islands				Ipsos**	TPSS, CYBMP
FSM				Ipsos**	TPSS, CYBMP
Fr Polynesia				Ipsos**	TPSS, CYBMP
Wallis & Futuna				Ipsos**	TPSS, CYBMP
Tokelau				Ipsos**	TPSS, CYBMP
New Caledonia				Ipsos**	TPSS, CYBMP
Guam				Ipsos**	TPSS, CYBMP
Nthn Marianas				Ipsos**	TPSS, CYBMP
SE ASIA					
Timor-Leste	X		TX	Ipsos/Tebbutt	
Indonesia		Subtitles, News		Ipsos TV surveys	
Philippines				Ipsos TV surveys	

	MOUs	In-language content	Infrastructure	Audience Insights	Content funding
Singapore				Ipsos TV surveys	
Malaysia				Ipsos TV surveys	
MEKONG					
Thailand				Ipsos TV surveys	
Cambodia				Ipsos**	
Vietnam		Subtitles		Ipsos**	
Laos				Ipsos**	
Myanmar				Ipsos**	
NORTH ASIA					
China		Subtitles		Ipsos TV surveys	China Tonight
Taiwan				Ipsos TV surveys	
Hong Kong				Ipsos TV surveys	
Macau				Ipsos**	
Japan				Ipsos**	
South Korea				Ipsos TV surveys	
SOUTH ASIA					
India				Ipsos TV surveys	India Now
Nepal				Ipsos**	
Sri Lanka				Ipsos**	
Bangladesh				Ipsos**	
Maldives				Ipsos**	
OTHER					
Mongolia				Ipsos**	

Digital* ABC Pacific, ABC Australia iView, ABC.net.au/news, ABC Radio Australia web stream, podcasts
Ipsos** TV data based on extrapolations from Ipsos TPSS, CYBMP Funded by DFAT PacificAus Sports