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Working to an International Audience

(One International Broadcaster's Tightrope Act)

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ABSTRACT

Broadcasting to an international audience presents many challenges including story choice for audience interest; time zone differences and cultural sensitivity. These challenges are magnified when broadcasting to a range of countries simultaneously. This paper examines the requirements of an international broadcast through the prism of *The Breakfast Club*, a live broad-range program that broadcasted live on more than a dozen Pacific and six Asian countries. The author, its Executive Producer/host discusses how the program navigated the many difficulties of working to such a broad audience, and how it dealt with new audiences that came on board during its tenure.

KEYWORDS

Radio

Broadcasting

International

Soft Diplomacy

Asia-Pacific

INTRODUCTION

This paper is an experiential and reflective examination of the issues involved in working to an international broadcast audience. The issues examined include audience appeasement; cultural disparities; dealing with the requirements of the originating network; difficulties in cross-country engagement and potential international political issues. In examining these issues I use my own experience as an international broadcast presenter at Radio Australia (RA), the international arm of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) which is a public broadcaster.

This research contributes to the area of broadcast audience research, with its value lying in the fact that many of the issues I faced are still extant for international broadcasters, particularly international broadcasters working for public institutions. While there has been a great deal of commentary and research on international broadcasting,¹ my program existed at a unique time in international broadcasting: the RA was expanding its international radio reach and was trying, often by trial and error, to exploit new markets in new regions in the world. Our efforts were from scratch. We were not tweaking an existing model; we were rebuilding from new, attempting for the first time to attract not ex-pat Australians but locals in our destination countries. I believe it is unlikely, in this age of cheap internet broadcasting, that an international broadcaster will attempt such an audacious radio push again.

METHODOLOGY

This paper uses narrative inquiry and reflection. In this case the narrative is my own; the stories coming from my experience from the genesis of the program in 2005, to its demise nine years later. This paper uses two entwined methodologies: an Experiential research model and a Reflective Inquiry. The first method outlines the program's experiences, as I say, from my

¹ Refer to the submissions to the Australian government and the Lowy Institute documents in this paper.

perspective, and the second adds a layer of interpretation, or in my case, retrospective interpretation.

Experiential research though is the starting point. Heron (1981, p. 1) says that in Experiential research:

".. the subjects of the research contribute not only to the content of the research, i.e.: the activity that is being researched, but also to the creative thinking that generates, manages, and draws conclusions."

In this case, the subject for this research model is me. I recount the issues that arose during my own program. This research method explains therefore not only the issues and events I faced in the international broadcasting field, but also the reasoning behind my decisions at the time. However, this paper goes further, with reflection as a central focus here, all of it retrospective. This is the *Reflective Inquiry* element. Dewey says the value of this inquiry lies in:

"...coming to see the conditions from another point of view, and hence a fresh light. But this reconstruction means travail of thought" (1902, pp. 3–4).

It should be noted that the reflections in this paper were written six years after I left RA, giving me space and time to look back with fresh eyes. In that six years I had become an academic, taught broadcasting at two universities, submitted a PhD and written and presented several research papers. This gave me the new perspective which Dewey champions, a perspective which allowed me to critically analyse my own actions at RA and to assess whether there might have been other options. Hence throughout the paper I ask the questions: did we do the right thing in our approach? Was it worthwhile for our audiences, and was it worthwhile for the ABC's investment in our program?

CONTEXT

Working in a public broadcaster to an international radio audience is a tightrope that is higher and longer than the one walked by private domestic broadcasters. A private broadcaster, domestic or international, needs to satisfy advertisers and is driven by the need for profit, while publicly-funded programs need to answer to the public broadcaster's charter.

The investment in public broadcasting is not cheap. In 2018 the ABC set aside 11 million dollars of its total budget for its international broadcasting.² Apart from staff and management, there are licence costs, equipment, maintenance and often staffing in-country. Like all media organisations, the public broadcaster will need to justify these costs which, in this case, is to its own government. Audience will be part of this justification. If no-one listens, then the program will be difficult to justify.

Up until a decade ago, international broadcasters into the Asia-Pacific were mainly government-funded public entities such as RA, Radio New Zealand, China Radio International (CRI), the BBC World Service, and Voice of America (VOA). These broadcasters may have been the voice of their originating country's government (CRI), or a government-funded independent voice mandated by legislation in the originating country. Into this last category falls RA, founded two months into WWII to counter the international voices of the Axis powers.³

For sixty years RA was part of this oligopoly of government-sourced international broadcasters, then the internet changed the game. Today every domestic radio show across the world may put its programs online, crossing borders into any country.⁴ RA was an early adopter of this opportunity, with elements of RA programs podcast online from around the turn of the century. This said, from 2005 RA was putting more focus on the transition from

² *ABC Submission to the Australian Government's review of Australian broadcasting in the Asia-Pacific*, ABC, August 2018, Sydney, p. 3.

³ J Wood, *History of International Broadcasting*, 2000, IET ISBN 0-85296-920-1, p. 169

⁴ Except where governments block the website.

shortwave (SW) broadcasting to FM.⁵ This was a major internal change because up until then RA broadcasted exclusively on SW. These SW audiences had been declining internationally for years. The BBC World Service revealed in 2010:

*".. a 20 million AM (short and medium wave) audience loss in 2010, contributing to its overall audience fall from 188 million in 2009 to 180 million in 2010."*⁶

One reason cited for this decline was that SW was not of a quality required of an audience increasingly interested in music:

*"Shortwave stations seem to be everybody's last choice. Shortwave sounds terrible, it keeps fading, receivers are expensive, stations are difficult to find, and you keep having to retune."*⁷

The reality is that SW was never a mass medium in either the Pacific or Asia. Many receivers did not have a SW band (and few, if any, car radios had such bands). SW does still survive in the Pacific, but mainly for emergency broadcast services rather than as a day-to-day entertainment medium:

*"Shortwave is used not just by international radio stations or radio amateurs but is also essential for aviation, marine, diplomatic and emergency purposes."*⁸

⁵ RA stopped its SW broadcasts entirely in 2017.

⁶ A O'Keeffe, *International Broadcasting and its Contribution to Public Diplomacy*, The Lowy Institute, 2010 Sydney.

⁷ J Goslino, Research findings about radio in general, *Audience Dialogue*, 2009, viewed on 23 July 2020, <http://www.audiencedialogue.net/pmlr3-1.html>

⁸R Obreja, Does shortwave have a future? *Radio World*, 2019, viewed on 10 July 2020, <https://www.radioworld.com/columns-and-views/guest-commentaries/does-shortwave-have-a-future>

RA started the switch to FM by buying FM licences and frequencies on the FM band in Pacific countries for its English-language services.⁹ In addition, negotiations started for licences in Cambodia, Laos and East Timor, extending the reach of RA's English programs into Asia for the first time. Over the next three years RA was to get two English frequencies in Cambodia,¹⁰ one in Laos,¹¹ and one in East Timor (Dili). In addition, RA negotiated shared time in other countries, such as in Indonesia.¹²

In this time of flux, I was hired to be the executive producer and presenter of RA's new morning program *The Breakfast Club* (TBC) in September 2005.¹³ The purpose of this program was to offer personality-driven broadcasting to coincide with the increased reach offered by FM, with RA changing from a dry news and current affairs brand to a chat flow style that locals in our receiving countries could access on their car radios. I was to be a morning host who was the voice of Australia. I would still inform, but would do it in an accessible, entertaining way. The initial brief was that I would interview interesting people, play the latest music, give essential information and introduce our existing news programs. In keeping with the flow program host ethos, TBC ran across five hours every weekday morning encompassing three other news programs within that time span. I was to be a ringmaster of sorts, a host that welcomed the early audience, introduced the other programs across the morning, and offered continuity from 0700 to 1200 AEST.¹⁴ The initial rundown was as follows:

0705 – TBC starts

0710 – Early AM (ABC current affairs program)

0730 – TBC resumes

0800 – AM (ABC current affairs program)

⁹ In Tonga, Samoa, Vanuatu, Fiji, Niue, Solomon Islands and PNG.

¹⁰ Phnom Penh and Siem Reap.

¹¹ Vientiane.

¹² In Denpasar, Bali. The program broadcasted for one hour each weekday on Paradise FM, 100.9 RRI.

¹³ Later to be called *Radio Australia Today* (to avoid the time dependent label) and then finally *Radio Australia with Phil Kafcaloudes*.

¹⁴ Australian Eastern Standard Time

0830 – TBC resumes

1000 – Connect Asia (RA current affairs program)

1100 – TBC resumes

1200 – TBC ends and throws to news

As can be seen from the rundown above, the duration of TBC's segments varied from 5 minutes to 90 minutes. At 0705 there was only time to welcome the audience, forward promotion, do the regional weather and throw to Early AM. At 0730, 0830 and 1100 I had much more time, and the last one-hour slot from 1100 to 1200 was set aside for a discursive segment that may have been about health, music or an in-depth interview. But the important factor was that I would lead the audience through the morning as an affable, informative friend. Hence the name *The Breakfast Club*, which was to give the audience a sense that they were part of something inclusive.

The head of RA, Jean Gabriel Manguy, wanted TBC to reach as many audiences as possible, so in addition to the FM licences and shared airspace in Bali, RA's broadcast partner manager John Westland set up contacts with broadcasters in other Asian countries (where we had not been able to get licences). This resulted in weekly simulcasts between my program and stations RTHK in Hong Kong, Traxx FM in Malaysia, RTI Radio in Taiwan, Radio Thailand and MediaCorp in Singapore, although these programs were usually less than an hour in duration (the idea was to have a presence, even if only for a short time). The presenters from both countries would co-host the segment. Occasionally the simulcast would be longer if there was a special event, such as when we broadcasted live from the Australian Formula One Grand Prix in 2007, 2008 and 2010. We also broadcasted from our partner's studios in Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore as a co-host, with the show again going out on both networks. In addition, we produced live outside broadcasts from Phnom Penh, Bali and Samoa, and TBC presented the ABC's first English-language program from Guangzhou in China in 2007.

As a result of these interactions I developed some understanding of the needs of our audiences in these countries, although this understanding developed much more during the nine years run of the program, with daily interactions with listeners and feedback from partners including AusAID.¹⁵

To better service its audiences, RA decided that its broadcasting should go out on two streams: one to the Asian frequencies, and one to the Pacific. Pre-existing specialist Pacific programs broadcasted only on the Pacific stream.¹⁶ At the start, my program went on the Asian stream only, but after a few weeks it was put on both.

We built audiences steadily across its nine years until my program was cancelled along with a swathe of other shows. These cancellations were caused by government cutbacks to the ABC, which trickled down to RA which pared back to just two current affairs programs and a reduction in FM licences from 21 down to 13 after a change of government in the 2013 election.¹⁷ These cutbacks also led to the closure of the FM transmitters in Cambodia and Laos, ending the English-language presence in Asia. Flow programs like mine were stopped and the full-time staff of these programs were made redundant.

The precariousness of international broadcasting is highlighted by these cancellations. All these programs had followed the ABC charter, kept within budget and received good audience interaction, but the nature of public broadcasting meant our programs were susceptible to changes in government funding and, indirectly, the will of the government of the day.

THE ETHICS OF INTERNATIONAL BROADCASTING

¹⁵ The Australian government's international aid organisation which has a presence in many of these countries.

¹⁶ *Pacific Beat* hosted by Geraldine Coutts, and *In The Loop* with Isabelle Genoux and Clement Paligaru.

¹⁷ A O'Keeffe, International Public Broadcasting: A Missed Opportunity for Projecting Australia's Soft Power, *The Lowy Institute*, 2019, viewed on 28 August 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/international-public-broadcasting-missed-opportunity-projecting-australia-s-soft-power>

Government funding aside, any public broadcaster program is heavily predicated on what its governing body wants it to present. By this I do not mean that the supporting government necessarily dictates content, but the framework for the broadcaster's mandate is legislation which sets the charter which the broadcaster must follow.

In Australia private broadcasters have no such legislative mandate, but must obey a Code of Practice.¹⁸ Apart from this (and other legal boundaries such as defamation and racial vilification laws), the private broadcaster may skew their political, religious or editorial output to suit their proprietor's demands. As an example, in the 1980s I worked for a Sydney radio station, 2KY, which was owned by the NSW Labor Council, which had a close affiliation to the Australian Labor Party. During one NSW election,¹⁹ the station's managing director directed me not to give airtime to the Opposition (the conservative side of politics). Many years later, as an academic teaching journalism, I would cite this example to my students and ask them to tell me what they would do. Some told me they would refuse to comply (and risk their job), while others said they would agree to the demand of the person paying their wage. I told them I fell between the two. I agreed not to have the conservative voice on the station, but I would not play grabs of the Labor Premier denigrating the conservatives. I still am not sure I did the right thing.

The situation for public broadcasters is different. Like the rest of the ABC, RA's content is determined by the ABC Charter which, under section 6(b) of *The ABC Act* says the ABC must:

"transmit to countries outside Australia broadcasting programs of news, current affairs, entertainment and cultural enrichment that will:

¹⁸ Commercial Radio Code of Practice, *Commercial Radio Australia*, 2018, viewed on 25 July 2020, <http://www.commercialradio.com.au/CR/media/CommercialRadio/Commercial-Radio-Code-of-Practice.pdf>

¹⁹ The 1988 election, eventually won by the Liberal party's Nick Greiner. The paper's author was the station's political correspondent for this election.

- (i) encourage awareness of Australia and an international understanding of Australian attitudes on world affairs; and*
- (ii) enable Australian citizens living or travelling outside Australia to obtain information about Australian affairs and Australian attitudes on world affairs,”*²⁰

One interpretation of this charter, particularly 6(b)i, may suggest that RA should be an advertisement for Australia and its way of life. The words *advertisement* and *marketing* are not used as such, but it is open that they may be read between the lines. If so, then that RA is broadcasting to countries with other forms of government (eg: Tonga’s monarchy or Cambodia’s communist structure) raises questions as to whether this marketing is appropriate, especially if the RA programs are the only English-language programs in those countries.

This is complicated further by the fact that the *ABC Act* was supplemented by occasional thought bubbles by senior management, such as when in his 2009 Bruce Allen Memorial Lecture, the then ABC managing Director Mark Scott suggested that RA provided a ‘soft diplomacy’ option for the government:

*“Soft power.. is more than influence. It is the ability to entice and attract. Soft power rests on a nation’s culture, values and policies. 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.”*²¹

²⁰ Legislative framework, *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, 2020, viewed on 8 July 2020, <https://about.abc.net.au/how-the-abc-is-run/what-guides-us/legislative-framework/>

²¹ M Scott, *A Global ABC: Soft Diplomacy and the World of International Broadcasting*. ABC, 2009, <https://www.crikey.com.au/wp-content/uploads/Media/docs/091116-Bruce-Allen-Lecture-84dce8cf-47fa-41fb-950a-e724ab10a3ef.pdf>

This statement, made while I was presenting a breakfast radio program across Asia and the Pacific, muddled the water somewhat for the aims of the program. Would *soft diplomacy* dictate that there could be no critical analysis of the operations of the policies of the country to which the broadcast was heard? Would it mean that we needed show Australia at its best, and therefore not include stories about corruption and the failures of Australian policy?

Certainly *Section 6(b) ii* would suggest that not only are world affairs presented to an international audience, but that Australia's take on those world affairs must be given too. This pretty loose phrasing does not specify which Australian attitudes must be broadcast. The opinion of right-wing anti-immigration politician Pauline Hanson would almost always certainly differ for the opinion of the leader of the Greens or the government. The charter does not say the Australian attitudes must be the Australian government attitudes, but it is not ruling that out either. The way I approached this was to gain as broad a range of views as possible about any Australian and international events. We did this after the 2006 Fiji coup, which resulted in the Bainimarama Fiji government forcing the closure of the ABC transmitters at gunpoint in 2009, claiming the broadcaster had expressed negative reports about Fiji.²²

In the years after the coup we had broadcast a lot of analysts critical of the usurping Fiji government, but if we had a commentator who was critical of Bainimarama, strict rules of balance meant we then sought Fiji's reaction to the criticism. Bainimarama's Attorney-General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum often responded on TBC, offering an always acerbic and combative rebuttal. We were living up to the balance required in our charter, and probably providing entertaining broadcasting at the same time. It should be noted that after the Fijian ban, no broadcasters on RA were criticised by management or the government. It was never suggested that we had gone too far, or that we had failed in our soft diplomacy, although certainly this was no high point in the relations between the two countries.

²² Fiji shuts down ABC radio broadcast, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 April 2009, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/fiji-shuts-down-abc-radio-broadcast-20090415-a6v2.html>

ABC journalists who provide news content are trained not to give a personal slant on their stories. If the US president sends a midnight tweet critical of his opponents, then it is likely that the Australian coverage of this story may not differ too much from a disinterested story produced in the US. It may also be argued that the ABC with its strict disinterest rules would be more even-handed than Trump-supporting media like Fox News, or Trump-critical outlets like *The Guardian* or *The Huffington Post*.

INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCES

In the case of public broadcasters, there may be no requirement that the audience be top-rating. Indeed, *The ABC Act* makes no reference at all to audience size as a signifier of RA's success, but it would be a naïve executive producer who believed there was no point in having an audience. On a very basic level, a strong audience would be a bargaining chip in government negotiations or, for that matter, within the broadcaster itself. Certainly the surveys supported the move from SW to FM. A 2009 survey in Vanuatu²³ showed RA's FM audience had grown to dwarf that of SW:

²³ Tebbutt Research, *Project RA/AN Vanuatu*, ABC International, 2009, p. 7.

RA audience by recency, source



	Last listened to RA (%)	Listened to RA on FM (%)	Listened to RA on shortwave (%)	Listened to RA on rebroadcast (%)	Listened to RA web stream (%)	Listened to RA on unspecified (%)
Today	10.0	6.0	0.6	3.4	0.2	
Yesterday	15.9	11.4	1.8	3.5	0.4	
In the last 7 days	25.5	17.9	2.8	6.6	0.4	
In the last month	13.1	8.4	1.0	4.6	0.2	
In the last year	3.8	1.6	1.0	1.2	0.2	0.2
More than 1 year ago	0.8	0.6	0.4		0.6	0.2
Total listened this way	69.1	45.9	7.6	19.3	2.0	0.4

Base: Radio listeners (n=497)

FM dominates as the main source of listening to RA, followed by rebroadcast. 8% use shortwave, while 2% have ever listened to RA programs on the internet.

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FM greatly extended our reach into Asia too. Two surveys carried out in 2006 found our program's Cambodian FM listenership was 178,000 each week (Green Goal Research, Nov 2006), and that RA was the top English radio station in Dili, East Timor with an audience of nine thousand (Insight East Timor Nov 2006). Around the same time a survey was carried out in our Pacific listener countries to assay RA's audience share each week:

"PNG (Port Moresby & Lae) 27.3%

Fiji (Suva & Nadi) 22.8%

Vanuatu (Port Vila and Santo) 58.2%

Solomon Islands (Honiara) 56.9%

*Samoa (Apia) 22.7%"*²⁴

This result appears a strong figure, but it needed to be tempered by the terms of the survey: the respondent needed to have listened just once in the last seven days. They didn't need to

²⁴ Conducted by Fijian based group, Tebbutt Research <http://about.abc.net.au/press-releases/radio-australia-connects-with-pacific-audiences/>

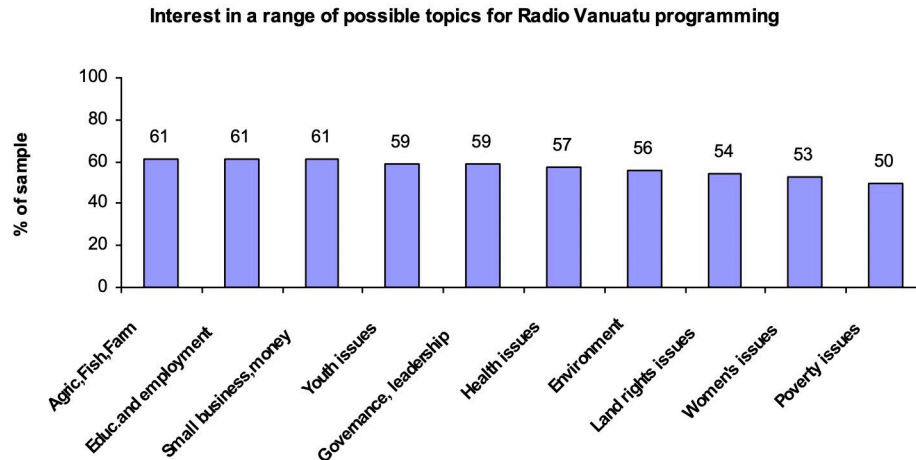
listen for any period of time; and they didn't have to be regular in their listening habits. That one listen could have been a sports broadcast, or even just a momentary listen while switching between other stations. It did not ask about content; it did not ask if it liked what it heard. To me as an experienced producer it was of limited value. But the result encouraged management to channel more funding to my program, allowing one producer to go from part-time to full-time.

Unlike in a commercial broadcast setting, this survey result was not used to attract advertisers, nor was it used for promotion (RA had little budget for on-going in-country promotion anyway). Yet it was seen as a sign of success and celebrated. Although good audiences were not mandated by the ABC, they were still wanted. To survive, my program needed to reach them. And keep them.

PLAYING TO THEIR EARS

Assaying audiences in an international context is not as simple as it is for a domestic station which may hire a research group to call selected people in selected places for ratings or feedback. However RA did try to get some qualitative feedback about what listeners wanted to hear. It surveyed listeners in Vanuatu in 2008,²⁵ and the following was ranked as the most important topics among listeners:

²⁵M Colbert, *National Survey of Media Usage 2008*, ABC Audience Research, p. 15.



This result was close to a dead heat for the business topics and social issues, with health being high on the list. The heavy focus on business-related topics raised some questions among RA's broadcasters because when such topics were aired they rarely led to listener engagement. It was especially surprising that music and sport did not feature as they were among the highest audience-requested topics on many of our programs.

In 2011, RA attempted to make a wider assay of people in the Pacific to find what its audience wanted. Given the high cost of a quantitative survey, RA chose to survey a series of focus groups from a selected group of the listener countries. These focus groups included selected people from Tonga, Samoa, Vanuatu, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Cook Islands, Solomon Islands, New Caledonia and Fiji. These focus groups were small (with no more than ten people); the participants comprising friends of language service employees, listeners who had engaged via email and text, and business contacts. Given the small size of the samples, the results could never be definitive, but it is interesting that every sample group came up with roughly the same results. These were (1) music, (2) sport, (3) health, (4) cooking, (5) personal stories and (6) news. Except for health, this contrasted strongly with the Vanuatu survey conducted only three years before, and highlighted the variation in such surveys.

It was surprising to me that religion did not feature in the focus group results, given the heavy reach of Christianity in much of the Pacific. It might be inferred that the focus groups were not broad enough in demographic to include the religious element of these societies. This once again indicated to me that this kind of survey was unreliable.

The surveys led management to request several programs, including TBC, to focus even more on these themes, including a specified number of songs every half hour, sports news in every hour and more health stories and personal interviews. There were several heated management meetings about the mandating of content based on these surveys. Management wanted the survey results to be the only basis for programming. I argued strongly for the surveys to be only one factor in our research, especially as the sample size was so small and with obviously a large, although unquantified margin for error. Ultimately management agreed to my hybrid formula of survey and experience. I also wanted to face the religion issue, and three years after the survey I had been preparing for a regular weekly segment with three religious leaders to discuss religious issues. The segment was to be called *Three Wise Guys*. It was planned for one leader to be Christian, one Muslim and one Hindu. However, the program was cancelled before the first of these segments could air.²⁶

To assay our Asian audience would be much more difficult and expensive. It would need to be been done in each country and take into account that the audiences had smaller rates of English-speaking people. We tried smaller on-air surveys across the run of the program, asking people what they would like to hear, but responses from locals in Cambodia, Laos and East Timor were low, possibly because they did not have the means to text or email. In those countries our surveys were mostly answered by the same twenty or thirty listeners, many of them ex-pats. When listeners asked for the music of 1980s Australian bands *Cold Chisel* and *Midnight Oil*, it was a signal to me that these respondents were not in any way representative of the tastes of locals in our audiences.

²⁶ See p. 13 *Cultural Issues*.

As I explained earlier, it was mandated by management that we have two songs per half hour, but it was left to us to choose which songs we should present. In 2012 we were assigned a music programmer, Kim Taylor. She worked with our program team to select music that might be of interest to audiences in both our Asian and our Pacific streams, but no amount of experience will tell us whether a new American rapper will be accepted by a Tongan or Laos audience. In an attempt to take out some of the guesswork, Taylor sourced several top-ten charts from Pacific countries, but these were not sales top-tens; they were playlist top-tens from music stations in competition with us. These stations were guessing as much as we were, although they might have better local knowledge. We were also aware that we were not necessarily aiming for the same audience as these music stations, some of whom were after a teen audience; while our audience would probably be older (considering our focus on news, current affairs and interviews). Then there was the regional issue. Pacific music might have little interest to city audiences in Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Our best guess to resolve this was to present that latest music that might transcend city barriers. Taylor's Pacific-origin top-ten lists became the starting point from which we could select music that might appeal equally to an Asian audience. We introduced the new releases by international artists such as Snoop Dogg, Kanye West or Alicia Keyes in a segment co-hosted by Taylor, where she talked about the artist, sometimes interviewing them live. We had decided to make the music programming personality and story-based as much as we could.

For health it was easier, as our program already had two health segments: *Sound Mind* which looked at one element of mental health each week, and *Sound Body* which did the same for physical health issues. We did need to be careful to make it accessible for listeners who had English as a second language. So when there was a disease outbreak, such as Malaria or Bird Flu, we explained symptoms and treatment in simple terms. Constant talk about disease can be alienating to an audience, so some of themes we covered were about body functions: snot, poo, farts, sneezes and occasionally sexual function (although we needed to be mindful of the religious exigencies of the Pacific audience).

Political coverage also needed to be well-considered. Except for rare instances where the politics of the two regions crossed over (such as China's investment in Pacific countries), audiences naturally are more interested in their own country's politics than that of a country thousands of kilometres away. It may also be surmised that countries within the Pacific or within Asia were not strongly interested in the politics of their own neighbouring countries, given that politics was not on the list of preferred topics presented by our focus groups. I decided that politics coverage should be mostly news and event driven, such as the day that East Timor's president Jose Ramos-Horta and its prime minister Xanana Gusmao were attacked in assassination attempts in February 2008. We first heard about this through an email from a listener. After verifying the news we ran a blanket coverage, with RA newsroom staff feeding into our program. My rationale for deciding to go live on this event was that while it was confined to only one country, it was potentially destabilising to the region, as well as being a compelling event even to people who are not normally interested in politics. That day we received much feedback from the audience, with dozens of emails coming from East Timor itself. The audience there was starved of information given the small number of radio stations in operation, none of which had the journalistic resources of RA. So there was an important information broadcasting element to the decision to go live.

With interviews, we selected people that would be of interest to the largest possible cross-section of our audience on both streams such as Olivia Newton-John, Roger Moore, Carrie Fisher or Paul Stanley from *Kiss*. For lesser known names like Miriam Margoyles, I would explain that she was one of the Harry Potter film actors, bringing in a point of audience interest.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

We may present a program that is interesting across Asia and the Pacific, but there are mechanical issues that affect how we reach our audiences. One that repeatedly provided us

with conundrums was the timing of the program. One example every year was the Australian change to daylight saving. RA broadcasted from Melbourne, which went forward an hour in October every year, and then went back an hour again every April. To avoid confusing our audiences, we decided not to change the broadcast times in our listening countries. This meant that every October we did the program an hour later than usual, and every April we would go back to the usual time. From 2005 until 2014 we made this twice-year changes with no difficulty, and the audiences did not know the difference. As an academic teaching journalism and broadcasting, I always told my students that audience had to be in the foremost of every programming decision. In making this decision to move our originating time, I was keeping to this audience-first ethos. The only inconvenience was for the staff of the program.

A bigger issue was the variation in the time in our listening countries. For example, when it was 1100 AEST in Melbourne, it was 0800 in Cambodia. For this audience, analysis may not be appropriate; that will come later after the news has been digested. However, we were simultaneously broadcasting to Pacific countries that were ahead of us on the clock. In Samoa, Tonga and Niue (which are three hours ahead of Melbourne) our program went to air live from 10am until 3pm. This meant that the broadcast was for these countries a late morning, midday and afternoon program. Clearly, this presented a dilemma as to content that might satisfy all the audiences, particularly with our program having to deal with being at once an overnight, breakfast, morning, midday and afternoon program (with an extra difficulty arising after we started broadcasting to The Maldives in 2008, effectively making the program an overnight show in that market).²⁷ On the very simplest level, we had to be careful not to wish the audience a “good morning”, if some of our audience was already in the afternoon. It may give the latter the impression we are not their station. And we were aiming to behave as a local station for each of our audiences. When we started we were on the Asian stream only, and so the name *The Breakfast Club* worked well, but after two weeks we were put on the Pacific stream as well, making the name erroneous for our eastern Pacific listeners. We

²⁷ Which meant being on air from 2am to 7am in the morning Maldives time.

changed the name of the program in 2008 from *The Breakfast Club* to *Radio Australia Today* to fix this.

CULTURAL ISSUES: LISTENING AND AWARENESS

In this section I will deal with the cultural issues that arose with this ambitious program of working to so many countries at once. I had broadcast domestically on many ABC stations, where my biggest challenge had been to satisfy the needs of urban and rural ABC audiences, and audiences in different states. But the Australian domestic audience had many elements in common: they were ABC listeners, mostly English-speaking; sharing many of the same values; governed by the same federal government which they did not fear (as opposed to the situation in some of the authoritarian countries RA broadcasted to); they did not, as a rule, suspect the motives of the broadcaster; nor did they live under the threat of coup (as in Fiji), insurrection (as in Solomon Islands), tribal violence (as in the PNG highlands), or have memory of collective atrocity (as in East Timor).

We had to be aware of our differences as a developed country broadcasting to developing nations, although we were not always successful. In 2013 I made a passing reference to the fact that Solomon Islands had a literacy rate of “only” 17%. Although this figure was low compared to Australia, it was in fact reasonable for the region at that time and much higher than PNG,²⁸ and in a region that generally has a low literary level.²⁹ My management was not pleased with my unintended disparagement. I also needed to watch how I spoke about Australia too. This applied in comparative cases of income, health levels, spending on hospitals, even how many cars an Australian family possessed. Although these are facts of Australian life, we needed to make sure we were not decrying the unfairness of an Australian

²⁸ C Graham, Alarming literacy gap in the Pacific, *DevPolicyBlog*, 2013, viewed on 26 July 2020, <https://devpolicy.org/alarming-literacy-gap-in-the-pacific-20131122/>

²⁹ The Pacific literacy rate in 2015 was 71%, 13% below the world average. (E Meleisea, *Pacific Education for All: 2015 Review*. UNESCO, Paris, p.28)

who is only on a \$40,000 wage, when this may be ten times the wage of the average Pacific or Asian listener.

I also needed to be aware that some listener countries were reliant on Australian aid in the form of military assistance.³⁰ For listeners in these countries something as simple as a tone of voice could be perceived as patronising, perhaps resulting in a damaging kind of reverse soft diplomacy. I had to know that my words and tones had the potential not only to annoy and alienate, but to make life difficult for Australians working in these countries.

Likewise, giving an Australian outlook on ethics could be an issue. When my mother died in 2011 after some years of dementia, I discoursed about euthanasia. Although my words were couched as an opinion piece, it caused consternation from one listener in the Pacific who was, ironically, Australian. RA decided we needed to hold a panel to bring in all sides of the debate in order to satisfy the listener.

This leads onto the issue of religion. Devout Christianity is central to the life of many Pacific communities. Abortion may be legal in Australia but it is criminal in many RA listener countries. This is not to say that abortion must not be discussed, but as with the issue of wealth, the subtleties of presenter sympathy or approval can destroy an audience's connection or trust. The same applies to proclamations of atheism or agnosticism. There is no rule against it, but it risks offending an audience deeply connected to their church. This applies to racy jokes, flirtations, perceived impoliteness and teasing. We needed to know our boundaries when challenging these sensitive mores. My co-host and I had a running good-humoured teasing, but some feedback from Cambodia was negative, suggesting I was bullying her. Clearly the subtleties of a co-host relationship did not always translate in a country where respect of women was paramount. When we broadcasted to Malaysia (where the co-host grew up) such teasing was accepted and our Traxx-FM co-hosts went further than me in their playfulness towards my co-host.

³⁰ The Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands operated from July 2003 to June 2017.

One issue that was sensitive during the run of our program was climate change. At various times Pacific islanders criticised how profligate waste by the developed nations led to the rising sea water issues affecting Tuvalu and Kiribati. For example, if we had done interviews about the effects of global warming on waterfront houses on the east coast of Australia, we could not expect sympathy, or perhaps even interest among our audience when climate change, partly caused by our own country, was affecting the listening countries' drinking and irrigation water.³¹

The same applies to the issues of political freedom and political stability. Australia had never had a political coup. Its governments are dethroned only by voters in elections, or by loss of parliamentary confidence, party disruptions, and in two cases, actions of vice-regal representatives. In every case the action was constitutional. In our listening countries however, this has not always been so. Fiji has had three coups in recent times;³² Solomon Islands saw personal violence force its prime minister to resign, and assassination attempts were made against the East Timor president and prime minister in 2008. During the run of my program, political freedom was in question in Cambodia, which had an authoritarian communist leadership headed by Hun Sen. Laos has also been Communist-ruled since 1953. The western value of freedom of speech is not a value in all of our listening zones. The forced closure of RA'S transmitters in Fiji is an example.

As a broadcaster I needed to be aware of these differences, and to know that while I may personally disapprove of the lack of freedom in our listener countries, I am talking to the citizens of these countries. They may be proud of their government or not, but they live in this regime and will probably die in it. The bleats of a relatively wealthy foreigner would probably fall deafly on Hun Sen's ears. I had to be aware and be subtle. Perhaps that is what Mark Scott meant by *soft diplomacy*.

³¹ N Kuruppu, Adapting water resources to climate change in Kiribati: the importance of cultural values and meanings, Environmental Science & Policy, Volume 12, Issue 7, November 2009, P. 799

³² In 1987, 2000 and 2006.

SUMMARY

Looking back on nine years of international broadcasting to both Asia and the Pacific, it seems amazing that we stayed on the tightrope as long as we did. We did not take the simplest route of following the *ABC Act* and just giving Australian perspective. We chose to do what we had done as domestic broadcasters: offer a palette that would be of interest to as many listeners as possible across both regions. In retrospect this attempt to broaden our audience could have been the very thing that led to our demise. We were political in the sense that we could demonstrate increasing audience numbers, but with the election of the conservative Abbott government in 2013, audience numbers would have had little effect on a government avowed to reducing expenditure. Survival would have been more likely if we had the diplomats on our side; if we could demonstrate that our broadcasts aided Australian interests overseas. We could have interviewed Australian manufacturers and ambassadors and trumpeted Australia. However we took the view that this would, at best, bore the listeners and, at worst, be patronising. Indeed I expect the program would have been far less popular (after all, ambassadors were never cited as a desired topic in our research). Instead we followed the feedback loops and fought to build audience numbers.

As the East Timor assassination attempt showed, we were also aware of our duties as journalists,³³ and we had no wish to be simply entertainers. We were a repository of information that could change and improve lives. If our health segments encouraged one person with symptoms of a disease to seek out medical help, then we felt we had done good.

We often had to shift ground on topics, and admit whether we were being too 'Australian metro' in our attitudes. Each day in our debriefings we would examine each segment and discuss whether what we were offering spoke to the people tuning in. Local knowledge came from the fact that the first producer on the program was from Malaysia. Subsequent

³³ Every staff member on the program was an accredited journalist, apart from publicity and technical workers.

producers were from Taiwan and Singapore. The fact that none of our producers were from the Pacific was a disadvantage for a program that aimed for both an Asian and a Pacific audience.

In retrospect perhaps we were too ambitious. Shooting for Asia and the Pacific in the one program meant that perhaps we could never service either adequately. Ours was not a Pacific program like our other shows *In the Loop* and *Pacific Beat*, both programs that clearly expressed that they were *of* and *for* the Pacific. We could never make that claim.

Instead we walked that cross-cultural tightrope. When the listeners started communicating, telling us that the program was part of their lives, then we knew we had gone beyond a few directives in a governing act, we had connected.

For a broadcaster, that makes the process worthwhile.

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