



# Australia Asia Pacific Media Initiative (AAPMI)

## AAPMI Submission: DFAT New International Development Policy enquiry

November 2022

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 supporters in most Australian states and territories and 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. We are agnostic about media companies, platforms and technologies, preferring that decisions be based on the national interest.

We welcome the Albanese government's announcement of its Indo-Pacific Broadcasting Strategy and the former Morrison government's recognition of the importance of broadcasting as part of Australia's Pacific Step Up.

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

### Executive Summary

AAPMI welcomes the increase in development assistance in the October budget and is delighted to see the restoration of the ABC's operational funding and additional \$32 million over four years to support its international services.

This has arrived at a crucial time in the regional media landscape. Australia's development partners in the Indo-Pacific region are facing the most geopolitically complex times since WWII. The growing contest of ideas between China and developed democracies, misinformation, disinformation (including state-sponsored media campaigns) and online extremist propaganda challenge Australia's interests and values, and those of many countries in the region.

The erosion of media freedoms erodes democratic political processes, and so directly undermines efforts to attain the SDGs. Public interest media in the Pacific in particular is under serious and immediate threat.

Media debate, independent journalism and quality education and entertainment programming are vital to development, democracy and good governance.

Independent media reporting on Australian development programs and projects in the Indo-Pacific is essential to their success. Yet, the profound importance of a strong public interest media presence to regional development has been largely neglected in Australia's development assistance programs.

There was no mention of the role of media or public communications in DFAT's submission to the JSCFAD&T Committee's 2018 *Inquiry into the strategic effectiveness and outcomes of Australia's aid program in the Indo-Pacific and its role in supporting Australia's regional interests*<sup>1</sup>. There is little evidence that Australia's primary aid providers

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<sup>1</sup> DFAT Submission No. 8. *Inquiry into the strategic effectiveness and outcomes of Australia's aid program in the Indo Pacific and its role in supporting our regional interests*, Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. June 2018.

recognise the value of independent public interest journalism for other areas of development, or that they have the expertise or capacity to deliver quality media development.

Australia's development assistance strategy is a 'soft power' tool which supports the national interest, demonstrating and promoting Australia's values and magnifying its international influence<sup>2</sup>. It must adapt to the rapidly changing geostrategic environment by recognising the influence and challenges posed by rapidly expanding digital media, and grasping the opportunities it offers, to secure peace and stability in the region.

Public interest media's role in holding power to account, providing fair and accurate information, raising awareness about national, regional and international issues, giving voice to citizens (including disadvantaged citizens) and engaging them in debate, is vital to the success of Australia's development assistance. Support for media and technical training, content development in collaboration with regional and diaspora media professionals, and in country professional media organisations will ensure journalists can report on and discuss Australia's aid program without government interference or expectations.

*Without informed and engaged citizens, the prospects of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals are remote.* The effectiveness of disaster preparedness and humanitarian assistance projects, programs promoting inclusive economic growth, better health, educational achievement, gender equality and democratic freedoms is highly dependent on the provision of relevant information. Communicating Australia's development assistance would be enhanced by quality, independent reportage by regional media in local languages and reflecting local cultural sensitivities.

Independent regional media's strength lies in its capacity to reach different audiences through various channels with a range of content, and influencing even audiences skeptical of government, and especially foreign government communications. Indo-Pacific media organisations have a unique ability to amplify every aspect of Australia's engagement and partnerships in the Indo-region including its development assistance programs.

Australia has a reputation in the Pacific as the main provider of support for public interest media and in Asia as a valuable player. By investing in the development and sustainability of Indo-Pacific public interest media, the development assistance strategy will further enhance our reputation, projecting Australia's as a trusted, responsive and respectful development partner.

Australia voiced its commitment to media freedom on 10 July, 2019 when it signed the [Global Pledge on Media Freedom](#), an international partnership formed at the Global Conference for Media Freedom in the UK. Signatories agreed "to defend media freedom where it is under threat" and advocate for journalists' safety. Specifically, the pledge commits signatories "**to supporting the development of diverse, independent, public interest media**". AAPMI urges the government to demonstrate this pledge by actively supporting the development of public interest media in the Asia and Pacific.

Note that AAPMI more broadly recommends a recapitalised Australian media presence in the region with clear purpose based on an overarching policy in the national interest. The development of an Indo-Pacific Broadcasting Strategy is an excellent first step on this path and should be integrated into the overarching development assistance and foreign policy framework. To help achieve a comprehensive policy and approach, AAPMI has developed Guiding Principles for the implementation of an Indo-Pacific Broadcasting Strategy in the new communications era. See Appendix 1.

This submission recommends the government:

- allocate a minimum of 0.6% of Australian development assistance to train and support journalists, technicians and sustainable media organisations, digital distribution technologies and infrastructure and creative content production. With a total Australian aid budget of \$4.549 billion in 2022-23 the media development component should amount to \$27.294 million annually.

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[https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Joint/Foreign\\_Affairs\\_Defence\\_and\\_Trade/~link.aspx?id=1600155C731F4ACBAE94F702745696FC&z=z](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/~link.aspx?id=1600155C731F4ACBAE94F702745696FC&z=z)

- support media development that upholds core principles of aid effectiveness i.e., that it is locally owned, locally driven and produced.

### **Public interest media under threat in the Indo-Pacific**

Public interest media in the Indo-Pacific is facing an existential threat. The combination of increasing limitations on media freedom, expanding adoption of digital communications technologies by regional audiences and subsequent local revenue loss to global social media and content streaming platforms has created a perfect storm. Without support from development partners and philanthropic organisations many regional media organisations will not survive.

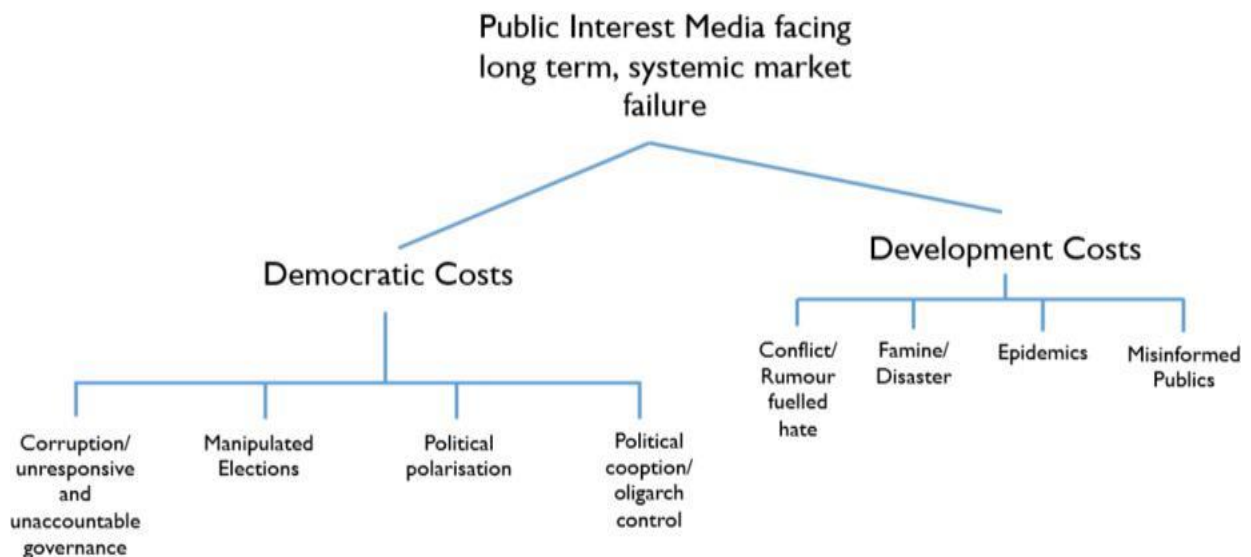
In Asia, media freedom is being curtailed by the adoption of China's state-controlled media model, the buy-out of media companies by companies with links to the Chinese Communist Party or other vested interests, the curtailing media freedoms and attacks on journalists. All nations in Asia rank in the bottom third of the Reporters Sans Frontiers [Media Freedom Index](#). In the Pacific, journalists and media leaders have [spoken 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.

At the same time, media in our region face existential challenges including:

**Geopolitical, especially the growing influence of the China on the region's media.** Media in both Asia and the Pacific are being courted by China in an unprecedented campaign described by respected academic researchers as no less than a plan for '[global media dominance](#)'. The sophisticated and multi-layered approach China takes to influencing the world's media is documented in [this](#) report from the International Federation of Journalists. In the Pacific, journalism academics have [expressed](#) concern about the creeping influence of China on media freedom. A mix of 'no strings attached' financial aid, 'look and learn' tours of China for journalists, increased broadcasts by Chinese media, money for co-productions with Chinese state-run media (with editorial veto), paid advertorial inserts, the demonstration-effect on governments of an autocratic media model and more, have respected commentators seeing China [winning](#) the information war in the Pacific. In February this year ABC managing director David Anderson [told a Senate hearing](#) 'The single biggest piece of information that comes back to us from the public broadcasters (in the Pacific) is concern over the pressure the Chinese government put on them to carry content'. Additional concerns include:

- the large number of Chinese state-controlled English language services in television radio and online
- a push by Chinese state-owned media to sign additional broadcast MOU's with Pacific media companies.
- an expanded Pacific-based network of Chinese correspondents (e.g. Xinhua has a Suva correspondent while there are no Australian correspondents anywhere in the Pacific other than the ABC's Port Moresby correspondent)
- a 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 Expanding Chinese language media in the Pacific, again with locally-based staff.

**Financial challenges for regional media caused by digital disruption and exacerbated by COVID** It is widely acknowledged that the business models available to public interest media in the Indo-Pacific are disappearing as advertising revenue flees to digital platforms which do not pay for the journalistic product they publish. 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.**

Given the current geostrategic challenges confronting the Indo-Pacific region, Australian development assistance for sustainable, quality, independent media in the region is urgent.

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. Note that China has ramped up its support for and engagement with Pacific media through content deals and substantial journalism training and visitor programs.

In the Pacific, the full impact of digital disruption is yet to be felt but it will be particularly dire for many media organisations. Media diversity and local ownership is strong, but profitability is weak. There is a very real risk that public interest journalism may not survive, providing more voice to extra-regional players. Carefully targeted development assistance is needed to help Pacific media organisations manage the digital transition to enhance their capacity provide and protect public interest journalism and create relevant content.

Digital media technologies offer immense opportunities to the region, particularly disadvantaged communities, and the desire for increased connectivity is obvious. The COVID pandemic demonstrated for remote communities the advantages of being able to buy goods and services online if, and when, they have connectivity.

**Mis- information, dis-information and information warfare.** Misinformation and dis-information, (particularly that circulated on social media) are rife in the Pacific and Asia creating a significant challenge to democracy and stability. Political disinformation directed at issues ranging from the local to international level, [COVID](#) and other health misinformation, trolling of individuals as well as financial scams is commonplace. Mis- and disinformation campaigns are increasing fear in the community and undermining trust in essential democratic institutions. A December 2021 [report](#) for USAID focusing on the region notes that democracy has been in decline across Asia and the Pacific for more than a decade and that information disorder plays an important role in destabilising democracy. Quality independent media is an important antidote. Fact-checking, news investigations, public awareness campaigns and media/social media literacy initiatives need significant additional support, especially in the Pacific.

**Media Freedom environment** - Media Freedom in the Pacific and Asia is under increasing challenge. The Reporters Sans Frontier 2022 Media Freedom Index [says](#) “Press freedom has deteriorated dramatically” in the Asia Pacific region, with many countries ranking poorly and dropping places in the index. In South-East Asia, journalism organisations and media unions independent of the authoritarian state are struggling to survive as governments have used the pandemic as reasons to crack down on dissent and exposure. Public interest media has had a chequered if brief history in the region after the so-called democracy wave of the 1980s and 1990s, with the recent decade more notable for reversals in media freedoms, as documented by RSF (Reporters Without Borders) reports. An insightful example of how public interest media is curbed can be found in the International Federation of Journalists' [report](#) on

the COVID crackdown in Malaysia. Journalists across the region are subjected to threats and challenges to their personal safety. Specific concerns in the Pacific were outlined in a [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](#). Governments are increasingly copying China's state-controlled media model, taking greater control of their public broadcasters (most recently in Solomon Islands). Australian media, the ABC in particular, have for decades supported Pacific media and journalists by breaking important stories [passed on](#) to them by Pacific media and whistleblowers unable to publish due to censorship or bans on reporting. The ABC has also

### ***Australia's regional media development support***

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. In Asia, Australia has a long traditional of involvement in media development and respected for its that work.

**At present however, Australia's media development in the region has been reduced to a shoestring program in the Pacific and PNG and an almost non-existent contribution in Asia.**

Since the completion of the [highly effective](#) Cambodia Communications Assistance Project in 2018 Australia has not had any country-specific media development project in Asia.

In the Pacific, the funding for the flagship Pacific Media Assistance Scheme ([PACMAS](#)) during Phase 3 (April 2017 to June 2021) amounted to just [\\$11.39 million](#) (or approx. \$2.8 million per year). It was not able to cater to all Pacific Island Forum countries. While funding has been increased towards the later part of Phase 3, it still only provides for a narrow range of activities and countries. The smaller Media Development Initiative ([MDI](#)) in PNG seeks to support an even more challenged media covering a larger population. Additional programs such as [Women in News and Sport](#) assisted media in countries in both Asia and the Pacific (Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Tonga, Indonesia, Vietnam, India, Philippines). [Pacific Food revolution](#) demonstrated the power of mainstream media in supporting programs in health and nutrition.

These are valuable programs but insufficient to the task presented by the information environment in our region. It was beyond the scope of any Australian program to assist media management and businesses to navigate the digital transition and establish business viability or to support National and regional media organisations at a level which would make it possible for them to share their much-needed expertise in their own countries on issues such as online safety and misinformation, to consult properly with their national governments, regional organisations and development partners or to defend journalists and media houses facing challenges to media freedom.

As discussed above, quality public interest media is an essential pillar of democracy and development has a crucial role to play in explaining issues to the public in difficult times. Media development support needs to be funded sufficiently to make a contribution to sustainable quality journalism and other content, to support media businesses to make the transition to digital, to support media industry organizations and to support civil society to have its say.

It is welcome that in Phase IV, PACMAS will have an appropriately wider brief. However, if it does not receive significantly increased funding it will be unable to meet the objectives set for it. 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

The Global Forum for Media Development sets 0.6 per cent of national aid programs as a target for support for independent public interest media. 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 (AUD\$27.294 million in FY2023).**

## ***Separate funding for DFAT aid program communications***

Promoting Australia's aid and development contributions to the region is important to bolster support in Australia and inform communities about projects that may affect or involve them.

Funding for DFAT communications strategies and plans promoting the aid to domestic and regional audiences should be carefully considered. Target audiences demand different content to be effective. Regional content is best produced by media professionals with experience in the region, or relevant country, in local languages.

Using non-Indigenous production crews into the region to gather audio-visual material for DFAT communications can be counter-productive and deliver editorially inappropriate products, especially where the target audience is regional communities and stakeholders. Anecdotal evidence indicates that Embassy and High Commission's media/social media communications in the region about Australia aid projects are useful as story leads for Pacific media. However, DFAT communications about the aid program targeted to Pacific audiences is also perceived by some as aid funding being used for "propaganda" purposes instead of poverty alleviation.

**AAPMI strongly recommends that promotion of Australia's aid and development strategy and project activities be funded separately from the aid program**, and encourages DFAT to contract media professionals based in the region or drawn from diaspora communities to produce and advise on content targeted at regional communities.

*AAPMI experts stand ready to assist the Panel on any of the issues discussed above.*

## ***Signed on behalf of AAPMI – November 2022***

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**Prof Rodney Tiffen**, Emeritus Professor in Government and International Relations at the University of Sydney, specialising in media. Reviewer ABC Radio Australia (1989, 1995, 1997), contributor Finkelstein inquiry into the media (2011-12)

**Prof Jioji Ravulo**, Professor of Social Work and Policy Studies, University of Sydney with wide interests incl Aust diaspora communities, Asia Pacific projects and LGBTIQ+, TEDx speaker and media contributor, former actor and comedian

**Loau Donina Va'a** Founder and Chair, Pacific Women's Professional Business Network, Strategy Lead for the CORE Pacific Collective, a network formed in mid-2021 to support Pacific COVID-19 response in collaboration with the NSW Government.



**Emelda Davis**, President Australian South Sea Islanders (Port Jackson), Producer (Film & television),  
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**Graeme Dobell** Journalist Fellow with the Australian Strategic Policy Institute. Former ABC foreign  
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**Geoff Heriot**, consultant, former ABC editorial and corporate executive and foreign correspondent,  
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**Lynne Shori**, Founder Wantaim PNG (an Aust-PNG community organisation), co-founder Friends of  
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## Australia Asia Pacific Media Initiative (AAPMI)

### Guiding principles for the implementation of an Indo-Pacific Broadcasting Strategy in the new communications era

#### 1. A New Era

In the current digital era, media has rapidly moved to a multi-platform configuration; blending one-to-many, one-to-one, and integrated/collaborative and interactive services.

In the Indo-Pacific, independent public interest media face disproportionate challenges from dis- and mis-information, a deteriorating media freedom environment and existential financial pressures created by digital transition.

These trends, and the lack of a coherent, strong, confident and accessible Australian voice are increasingly damaging to Australia's interests and values in the region, especially as other nations fill the media void.

**To be effective a renewed Australian media presence in the Indo-Pacific will need be:**

- **governed by an overarching policy based in the national interest.** This policy would articulate the purpose of the Indo-Pacific Broadcasting Strategy and any subsequent or related activities. It would guide all Australian Government-funded or supported broadcast initiatives (or media services) and media development activities.
  
- **address trends in the information environment and technological context by:**
  - designing multi-platform services tailored for the interests and needs of each region, including in appropriate languages
  - reflecting Asian and Pacific voices in conversation with Australians and each other
  - producing content in partnership with regional media organisations wherever possible
  - being involved in two-way skills training, education and development initiatives
  - consulting with Australia's Asia Pacific diaspora groups and with Australian South Sea Islander and First Nations communities on content and services
  - consulting, in our region, with audiences and public interest media organisations on content and services
  - supporting media freedom in the Indo-Pacific
  
- designing services capable of reaching target audiences at times when local communications are disrupted, including as a result of political interventions or natural disasters.



## **2. Australia's media service**

To be credible; to build on the reputation of Australia's public media services in the past; and, to ensure the richest possible content creation, the renewed Australian media service should:

- provide content and services coordinated through a coherent Australia brand that can be trusted and consistent across platforms
- in fulfilling its purpose be editorially independent of government and business
- place high priority on original, accurate and high-quality public interest journalism and media content
- offer opportunities to involve all Australian media sectors in production, appropriate to the audiences being served
- apply contestable content acquisition policies
- benefit from stable institutional arrangements, and long-term funding
  - reflect Australia's 21<sup>st</sup> Century diversity by drawing on managerial, content-creation and development talent within Australia's Asia Pacific, Australian South Sea Islander and First nations communities

## **3. Australia's media development in the Indo-Pacific**

Australia is the leading source of capacity development and other assistance to media practitioners and organisations in the Pacific; it has also long been a valued actor in Asia. However, the scale of these programs is insufficient in the increasingly challenging regional environment.

To be effective Australian media development needs to recognise the immediate threat to the future of public interest journalism, especially in the Pacific where Australia is the primary actor.

As well as scaling up activities, Australia's media development would:

- maintain a focus on developing independent, quality, public interest media
- consult widely and recognise the best media development is partner-led
- support development of all aspects of media including content-creation, media management and business models, digital transition, and media partnerships with Australian and other Indo-Pacific media organisations.
- offer stable and long-term funding including multi-year programs and partnerships with specific media houses. These could include contestable content funds including for non-news initiatives such as children's programs.
- have a capacity for rapid-response projects in case of emergencies and unpredictable events
- support media industry bodies including national media associations to improve the quality of the media and represent their industry and its workers at a national and regional level on a wide range of issues (from advocating for the role of public interest media or commenting on digital safety or policy issues to tackling workplace discrimination or media workers safety issues)
- facilitate donor co-ordination led by recipient partners.