

CV

NAME

Hanh Tran

DATE OF BIRTH

February 1954

CAREER

Hanh Tran came to Australia as a Colombo Plan student in the late 1970's, and studied forestry and media. He then lectured in Photomedia at the Canberra Institute of the Arts, and headed the photography school at the Australian Centre for Photography. In 1993 he joined Radio Australia's Vietnamese Service as a producer, then moved to the BBC World Service in London, heading their Vietnamese Service from 1997 until 2001. After a 5-year break to look after his three children, Hanh returned to the ABC as a consultant and executive producer for Radio Australia's Vietnamese Service, which moved from shortwave broadcasts to an interactive and aspirational online service ('Bay Vut'). In May 2007 Hanh was appointed Chief Executive of Radio Australia, with immediate effect.

MEDIA USE

In the morning he turns to radio straight away – the only medium that allows him to keep track of things without being burdened with looking at a screen

FAVOURITES

Films and cinema are his passion. Keen gardener and keen photographer: is either growing something or taking pictures of the things that he has just grown. Contributes to ABC staff exhibitions that happen from time to time



NOT PLAYING IT SAFE

Hanh Tran is less than one year into his post at the head of Australia's international radio broadcaster. He's had a busy few months, but was pleased to talk to *The Channel* about the station and his plans.

What's been happening at Radio Australia since you took over?

Internally we have a lot of housekeeping to do. Basically I changed the way we produce our content to make sure everyone talks to everyone else, get a bit of cross-fertilisation going and the two-way traffic flow between English, which is the backbone of content, and our six other languages. Externally, we have to maintain our relationship with rebroadcasters – we have got a couple of new ones - and we had to look at expansion into audiences we haven't been able to reach before, like in India, Korea, Burma.

What are your priorities for Radio Australia?

Expansion without additional resources, that's a real challenge. Also coping with a market that is changing so fast, and trying to serve two sets of audiences. We are dealing with a loyal core audience who is still listening to short wave but we are trying to recruit new audiences who use mainly the internet. We are focused on Asia-Pacific. The Pacific mainly relies on our SW broadcasts, internet is not very reliable. In Asia we have on the one hand Vietnam with one of the highest internet uptakes in South-East Asia, and then countries that are still very fragmented in terms of platforms like Cambodia, Indonesia, and to some extent China. So we have to cope with a wide spectrum of access to the new media.

Vietnam is a test case for Radio Australia - it was the first language dropped for direct

broadcasts and moved to the web. What has the response been?

Our loyal listeners who are now mostly in their sixties and have still got their short wave radios complain bitterly of course, as do people who live in the countryside and don't have access to the internet. But regrettably, this is no longer our target audience. We want urban educated aspirational audiences and we hope that by serving this group the benefit will trickle down once they become leaders and opinion formers. The Vietnamese service had to drop the short wave because we can't do the internet very well if we have to spread our resources to transmissions at the same time. It was a hard choice in the beginning but in the end it became the only choice for us. In a sense Vietnam provides a template – I think eventually in countries like Cambodia, Indonesia, China, the young will take the internet and leave SW radio behind. The signs are there. Even where the short wave radio is available it is not the medium of choice because people are too mobile now, they want things to be portable, to be downloadable.

So broadcasters have to adapt to the way people are living their lives, rather than the other way round.

That's right. From my experience it seems that broadcasters change rather more slowly than our audiences. That is a problem and a challenge to manage this.

What does this new audience expect?

People are not terribly worried about political struggle any more, they aim for a better life, for more affluence, and they look to learning English, to a gateway to studying overseas to better their own lives. They are very worldly in terms of how to handle information pouring

in from western broadcasters like ourselves. So in that kind of environment we have to compete pretty hard to give them something that they can't find elsewhere. So we have to tailor our English lessons and aim at people who want to come and study in Australia.

Can Radio Australia's pioneering work serve as a blueprint for other international broadcasters?

There are lessons that we can learn from everyone else operating in this market. I am not sure whether we are leading in any area but I am sure that in Vietnam in terms of internet service to young audiences we have broken new ground. But I don't want to feel that the task is done because it is like hitting a moving target – once you think you have got something tied down it starts to move again. Right now we realise that the web site we designed barely twelve months ago needs updating because people want blogging, they want to express themselves, they want to interact a lot more. And there is not only the availability of resources, we are also coping with a workforce that is ageing and that is not amenable to change, not very adaptable at all. I try to be modest and I am an optimist but I don't think that success is going to be quick.

What can you offer audiences that other broadcasters can't?

We have proximity which works to our advantage, we pride ourselves on being very adaptable and finely tuned to the needs of audiences, on having local knowledge. Because we can't compete with well resourced broadcasters like the BBC we have to find niche markets which means that we have to be very sharp in reading the market and be prepared to make hard decisions to do a very limited number of things and not playing safe. It's a risky strategy but if

“ I am an optimist but I don't think that success is going to be quick ”



you get it right it will work. I am not sure there are any lessons that bigger broadcasters can learn from Radio Australia because our situation is quite unique.

Would you like to see technology suppliers making what you are doing on cross-media platforms easier?

At the moment, we are not ahead of technology, we are behind. We are still not fully capable of utilising a lot of the existing technology. And it's not just the technological side, we are also facing a management structure that is not very adaptable. Sometimes I feel frustrated that we are coping with a fairly traditional mode of thinking, and that applies to IT matters and editorial protocol. A lot of these things will be decided at a level above mine, change is going to be very slow.

Is India somewhere you are looking to expand to?

We are thinking of spreading the English content there, we won't have a Hindi service like the BBC or anything like that. Sport would give us a foot in the door and then we have to think about the content because it is a very sophisticated audience. We haven't got a comprehensive strategy worked out yet but we take heart with the

▲ Radio Australia advertised on a tuk tuk in Phnom Penh

progress made by our sister network, Australia Network, who is doing very well in having their cable TV shown in India.

Is there a synergy between Radio Australia and Australia Network?

Cross-promotion is something that we have started to do, and in technical terms there is great potential in piggy-backing on their signal in India.

In the future could Radio Australia and Australia Network news producers be one and the same, working across both platforms?

At the moment a review is in progress which looks at the operation of the two newsrooms – to see how the two could work together to avoid duplication, to cross-fertilise, all those things. We should have some concrete plan by February or March 2008.

So it is a time of immense potential change?

Yes, the fact that both the radio and TV network will come together under the same umbrella if you like, ABC International, will make it a lot easier for branding and that kind of thing - exciting times. I think we are going to combine our resources, produce a lot of multi-

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media material, so 2008 will be an exciting year.

What about the future – any wishes?

What I would like to do is to become a really well recognised brand name among our audience. People would see us as the first port of call when they look for information on study opportunities in Australia; in times of crisis in this region they will rely on us as an honest broker of information. And I would like us to be a little bit more adept at producing multi-media content because eventually that will replace the radio platform. I'd like to extend the network of FM rebroadcasters, and that gives us the look and feel of someone who has a lot of local knowledge because when you go to the internet it does not have that local feel. It's about trying to create that intimacy between Radio Australia and the audience.

Hanh Tran, thank you for talking to The Channel. ■

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