



BIG ISSUES LOCAL CONTEXT

Broadcasting in eight languages across Asia and the Pacific, **ABC Radio Australia** faces the challenge of making scheduled listening to scratchy short wave compelling while at the same time providing stimulating content for multimedia platforms. **Dr. Michael McCluskey** was appointed Radio Australia's new Chief Executive in May 2010 after 25 years with the ABC. What have the first months in the job been like?

I was excited, and to some extent anxious, when I first went into the role. I suspect even being a decade at the head of an international broadcasting organisation you won't come to terms with the depth and complexity of delivering content to multiple cultures in multiple languages, while maintaining the perspectives of your own country, and at the same time trying to grab the perspectives of other countries and reflect them to one another, as well as back to your own domestic markets. All the while aware that the media industry is the most rapidly changing business that you could possibly be in. So coming to terms with the brief has been an interesting element for my first few months in the role.

What is that brief?

I think the brief is to tell stories in meaningful ways. From the Radio Australia perspective it is to tell compelling stories about the cultures within Australia, and to deliver those stories in powerful ways to people in languages that are understood by the communities to which we are broadcasting, as well as in styles and context of the issues and the stories that are taking place in the countries we are going to. The brief is to tell those stories so that the culture and the values of our country are understood and consumed by people of other countries in a way that puts it in context with the issues that matter

to them. Some have argued that for international broadcasting this is less important now because domestic broadcasting is available through the internet and mobile platforms to anyone in the world, just about.

Is that the case in your target areas?

Not in the rural areas of the Pacific and the regional and rural areas of South East Asia, no. But if you are going into the sophisticated cities of South East Asia, yes. There is a very good offer of domestic services from their own country, and better broadband than we have in Australia at the moment. People can consume just about anything they want. Any domestic service anywhere in the world that is now streaming its content or making it available through podcasts or other platforms in the digital space, we've got to compete with that.

How do you make RA stand out?

We are starting a process to build a new model of delivering content. We are going to drive audio in a much more hybrid fashion, so we'll have bi-lingual radio stations that are streamed online, available through transmitters in certain locations in the Pacific and South East Asia. We'll effectively have nine audio stations and we'll be able to contextualise stories in both English and in the language of the country we are going to.

The other part of it is we'll be telling those stories in digital media as well. We have to take into

account the diversity of the people who are totally connected to the people who are almost not connected. We have just done a survey in Papua New Guinea where a large number of people are saying they are still accessing our content through short wave radio listening. In South East Asia and the Pacific we have to continue to provide that content and not disenfranchise the audience that exists, and make that scheduled listening to scratchy short wave more compelling than it has been in the past, and at the same time provide interesting, stimulating content for all of these multimedia platforms.

How do you make SW compelling?

The way we are doing this is to focus more on live content. There is nothing to stop us now participating with the audience, even in the short wave space. They may not have any electricity, but they still have access to mobile phones in many markets now. That means as long as we don't cause them to spend money which they don't have we can communicate with them through texting and through providing free text services.

We are offering an opportunity to engage with important stories in a way that matters to you where you are living but gives you a voice into a global issue, big issues like global warming, economic downturns, whatever we want to talk about. It's a globalised debate that has context. The context of my country, the context of your country.

What does this mean for producers?

Well, we are learning. We are working currently on training programmes with our journalists about handling the day-to-day direction with your audience, about the issues of the day and how we cover them best, and how we respect the cultures into which we are going, yet be robust and be brave to tell things how they are. So all of those elements are being put in place.

And interestingly enough, you know how at times people become

enthused with change, a number of our programme teams in different language units have actually decided 'We don't want to wait for the change processes, we want to start moving into the live interactive programming now', so instead of the old scheduled content they are moving to the idea of 'this is live, we want your interaction' and surprisingly, within a very short period of time, people have started participating. It's really quite remarkable and it tells us that people are interested.

What are your geographic priorities?

We focus on our neighbourhood, South East Asia and the Pacific, specifically the South West Pacific. We broadcast in Tok Pisin and in French as well as in English to a number of countries in short wave and we also run some FM transmitters in a number of countries. We are going into South East Asia in five languages, on a number of different platforms, but by and large we are going in on SW and in FM and the content is distributed to partner stations who are broadcasting elements of the content at different times of the day.

Some of that content is specific genre programming, such as innovations and technology, and some of it is current affairs style programming. In future, content will be interactive and live, and can be run as live or as a repeat/rebroadcast. We won't have the resources to run nine different services 24 hours a day, so some of our content will be repeated. What we want to do though is deliver content that actually matters to audiences wherever they live. So we will have quite different English feeds for a large amount of our content going into Asia, and in the Pacific we are separating out Asia and the Pacific.

Are rebroadcasters still hungry for content?

The answer is definitely yes. One hopes that our content adds value to the content they are delivering to their audience. There is another

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People still access our content through short wave
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▲ Live from Siem Reap

▼ Governor Felix Camacho of Guam interviewed at the launch of RA's first FM in Micronesia



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element - it is hard to continuously go out 24 hours a day making quality content. Some of these partner organisations might be running three or four radio stations on different topics in their markets. How are you going to feed the savage beast? So if you can find relevant interesting content and you know that it is from a trusted source, that's another reason why.

What is your relationship with the TV service?

Australia Network television targets basically the same market, with a slightly wider geographical area. There is shared content – some of our presenters present on the TV and on the radio. Our news service, the Asia Pacific News Centre, is a shared resource, as are digital and online spaces. We complement one another and we intend to complement one another even more. We have exactly the same purpose.

How is RA available in Australia?

Domestically Radio Australia is only available through online access or through your 3G mobile phone. Radio Australia has never directly transmitted within Australia - which is a very interesting point. We want people to understand that Radio Australia and Australia Network are providing an incredibly powerful service to the country, a very informative and entertaining service to the region, and that this is something that is fundamental to our standing in our community. It's not just about seeing how Australians operate within the context of the Australian domestic environment, it's about how we engage on global and important issues with the constituents, the citizens, the ordinary people of other cultures. It's very important that Australian citizens living in Australia understand that that is being done, because most of them can't hear our service and don't. And we want that to change.

Mike McCluskey, thank you.