

**Response from Jemima Garrett, Co-convenor, Australia Asia Pacific Media Initiative:**

**How would you describe coverage of the Pacific region by Australia media?**

Australian media coverage of the Pacific has been shallow and inadequate, even after the recent uptick in the wake of China's increased security push in the region.

For the bulk of Australian media, the Pacific has been somewhere you fly over on the way to Washington.

For Australian audiences, this neglect means there are important developments in the Pacific - beyond climate change and security - that Australians are not hearing about.

A generation ago every major news organization – including the AAP - had a Pacific correspondent usually based out of PNG covering the region – today there is just one – the ABC.

Not only are we ill-served by media at home, but Australia's media voice in the region - the ABC's international Service – has been reduced to a whisper (by budget cuts) just when it is needed most.

Those budget cuts, in 2014, saw 10 Pacific Islands Forum nations, lose their bespoke ABC services.

If we show no interest in what is happening in our own neighbourhood, why shouldn't the nations of the Pacific look elsewhere.

**Why does it matter? What is the risk of little or no coverage?**

China's soft-power push has the potential to change fundamental values in the region.

Whilst Australia ignores the region, China has been busy filling the vacuum. It is offering funding for a wide range of media activities, collaboration on content (with Chinese oversight), funding for technology, transmission, broadcast platforms, media industry bodies and journalist study trips to China.

When Pacific governments suffer periods of unpopularity China's authoritarian media model of command and control is attractive. Recently, we have seen new restrictions on media as part of COVID-related emergency measures and introduction of draconian new criminal libel laws.

One of the many urgent issues in the Pacific that Australians should be hearing about is the existential threat to quality journalism.

Pacific media have shown their courage in standing up to the Chinese government's attempts to shutdown questions during Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit but they face a perfect storm of challenges as sharply declining revenue – a result of digital

disruption and COVID – adds to the increasingly difficult media freedom environment.

Lack of revenue is making it almost impossible for Pacific journalists to do the investigations necessary to hold the powerful to account and to explain and report on geopolitical developments. Fragile balance sheets make Pacific media vulnerable to influence or capture. These forces come together to create a challenge to democracy itself in the Pacific.

By providing accurate and impartial coverage of the region, the Australian media demonstrates that we not just take the Pacific, its people and its politics seriously, we provide a model for a free and independent press.

By hiring Pacific reporters to be part of that coverage Australian media can play a role in ensuring Pacific journalism survives.

### **What needs to change?**

We need a sophisticated two-way conversation that reveals the rich culture and history of the Pacific and its contemporary dynamism and thinking.

Before the election, Labor announced an additional \$8 million for ABC services in the region as well as additional support for media development in the Pacific.

This is welcome but not enough.

The Albanese government needs to develop a major additional package of measures which enables

- the Pacific media to play its vital role in the public interest and to defend itself against threats to media freedom
- the ABC and other Australian media to work with Pacific journalists and creatives to bring a wide variety of news, documentaries, drama and other Pacific-based productions to Australian and Pacific audiences.

Media initiatives should see Australian media working with, not in competition with Pacific media.

Pacific people and leaders have told numerous Australian enquires that they want their voice heard in Australia.

In the Pacific Australia has long been seen as the most important media partner.

Without a significant package of additional measures Australia will lose that place to other countries that have acted more quickly to ramp up their both their own media and their contribution to Pacific media.