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Subject: International News Review

International News Review

This note outlines the details of the News Division's review of our international operations. It was originally intended to be circulated early next week, after the Head of International News, Steven Alward and I had finished directly briefing staff in our overseas bureaux on the proposals, and their potential impact. It was always the view of News Management that staff possibly affected had the right to be hear the proposals first hand and to provide feedback directly to us.

That process is still underway, and both Steven and I are still travelling. A series of misleading reports has meant staff both here and overseas have been left concerned and keen to know the details of what is really being proposed. As a result, this note is being released today. Steven and I will be back in Sydney next week, and an initial meeting with staff and union representatives has already been arranged for Thursday, November 11th.

Around the world, many media organisations are closing or scaling back their overseas bureaux because of the high cost of maintaining international reporting. The cost pressures are real, and the ABC is as affected as any media organisation by rising costs. We have an obligation to review what we do and to spend taxpayers' money wisely. But maintaining a strong network of ABC correspondents overseas is vital to our reputation and performance as a public broadcaster, and this review provides stability, certainty and a new sustainable platform for us to maintain and enhance that role.

Over the past 18 months we have been carefully reviewing what we do internationally, how and why we do it, and how we spend our international budget. The aim has been to align our funding with our editorial priorities, and to make sure that we are operating in the most efficient, fair and effective way. Through the review we aim not only to maintain the best and most extensive international operation in Australian journalism, but also to improve and expand it.

Savings identified as a result of this review are being used to:

- Open a new bureau in Kabul and examine ways to expand our coverage of the Pacific;
- Invest more money in travel assignments so we can do more original reporting;
- Train and invest in a network of reporters from across ABC newsrooms to supplement our correspondents in the field through backfilling and brief overseas assignments;
- Augment the 24-hour a day international production desk in Sydney to better manage the demand on correspondents;
- Develop strong partnerships with other international media organisations.

As a result of this review, ABC News will have journalists in more places overseas; our correspondents will travel more and have the chance to do more original reporting. There will also be more opportunities for ABC staff to work overseas on short-term assignments.

The Process

The News Division decided 18 months ago to extensively review its International News operations both in Australia and in our twelve bureaux around the world.

In approaching the review, the News Division determined:

- There would be no bureaux closed.
- There would be no net loss of correspondents' positions.
- There would be some reallocation of bureau resources to ensure we have the appropriate number of people in the right places to best serve our audiences.
- We would remove the current two-tier system of paying correspondents, one for News staff reporting to the Head of International News and one for positions attached to the Asia Pacific News Centre. This would be replaced with a proposed new approach to appointing and remunerating staff in a more equitable way that is in line with the best-practice approach of Australian-based organisations with international operations.
- We would restructure the international intake desk to ensure we have appropriate coverage 24 hours a day and we would adopt new production strategies. This has been done in conjunction with a restructure of the network news desk.

We can now outline the proposals flowing from the review and the further plans for consultation with all staff, including those who are potentially directly affected.

Conclusions of the review

- ABC News has decided to form an alliance with the television news agency Associated Press Television News (APTN) in four cities where we have bureaux: Jerusalem, London, Moscow and Bangkok. APTN is the international television division of The Associated Press (www.ap.org), one of the world's largest news-gathering organisations, with more than 80 bureaux worldwide, linked by a network of global satellites. APTN includes in its services provision of international camera crews, editing, studios, satellite services and full production facilities worldwide.
- In the case of Jerusalem, London and Moscow, it is proposed that the ABC will lease office space from APTN in central locations. These offices would be self-contained and for exclusive use by the ABC. They would also be fully equipped to meet the ABC's requirements. It is proposed that Bangkok will remain at its current location and that office will be remodelled to create two separate offices, one for exclusive ABC use and one for use by APTN.

- Discussions are underway with staff in relation to the proposal for APTN to provide some technical, infrastructure and administrative support for some of those bureaux. This may mean a potential reduction in the number of support staff employed locally. The agency agreement would mean that the camera operators in Jerusalem and London would be employed through APTN. Under this proposal, the ABC would be part of the selection process for these positions and they would work exclusively for the ABC. It is proposed that we pilot this for a year and then assess its effectiveness.
- There are no plans to extend these agency arrangements to other cities where we have bureaux. Importantly, there are also no plans to “outsource” any of our journalism. No producer or reporter roles will be taken over by APTN as part of these administrative and technical arrangements.
- The total number of correspondents will remain the same. The broad approach to assigning producers in bureaux is that there will be one producer for each single-correspondent bureau. Under this model, there would be a reduction in producer positions or producer hours in Tokyo, Bangkok, and Moscow. Discussions are continuing with staff in those bureaux.
- Having carefully reviewed our coverage and the editorial requirements, we believe the appropriate staffing for the Middle East bureau is a single correspondent and a camera operator/editor, augmented when the news agenda requires with back-up resources from other bureaux or from Australia. The Jerusalem bureau will therefore be reduced by one correspondent position. We are also reviewing the administrative and support functions of the ABC office in Amman.
- To provide us with more flexibility in coverage, we have set aside funds for a bureau that can be used to respond to a major story in a particular region. The first of these will be a bureau in Kabul in Afghanistan, initially for a year from early 2011.
- It is proposed that the current A-based remuneration model will be replaced with a best-practice model that is benchmarked against other organisations. This will not affect any staff already assigned to bureaux, but it will be rolled out as new A-based staff are appointed.
- This new best-practice model will apply to all correspondents, including those appointed to correspondent positions overseas for the Asia Pacific News Centre.
- The current model for determining terms and conditions and remuneration of locally engaged staff will be replaced with a consistent and more streamlined approach.
- We are proposing to transfer an administrative position to People and Learning to create a new role of Manager, International Employment, responsible for all contracts, and relocation and payroll activities.

Initiatives arising from the review

The review will deliver savings to the News Division. This will enable the Division to maintain the sustainability of its international operations and be more strategic in the recruitment, development, training and redeployment of correspondents. It will also allow News to fund from the savings:

- The bureau in Kabul in Afghanistan, initially for a twelve-month period. South Asia Correspondent, Sally Sara, will transfer temporarily to Kabul from early 2011. Sally has substantial experience in covering Afghanistan, and her skills and enthusiasm will ensure the bureau makes an immediate impact. The New Delhi office remains a critical part of our international network, and we are delighted to be able to announce that Anne Barker from Jerusalem will move to New Delhi to take up the position of South Asia Correspondent. Anne's wide-ranging experience both in Australia and overseas make her ideal for this key role.
- An additional amount of money will be allocated to travel for more off-base assignments and more original reporting.
- An additional amount will be set aside for backfilling behind correspondents when they are on leave or on assignment for a significant period. We will call for expressions of interest in these and other short-term assignments so we have a pool of ABC journalists in Australia who we can call on for them.
- We will develop a more strategic approach to preparing correspondents for postings, including advertising jobs and selecting correspondents six months ahead of the assignment date.
- We will develop a strategic approach to a range of training for correspondents, as well as secondments to relevant program areas and the International Desk in Sydney.
- We will develop a more structured process to manage the return of staff to appropriate roles in Australia at the end of their postings.
- The co-ordination of international news has been enhanced with the appointment of a second International Intake Editor.

Consultation process and next steps

Next week's meetings will mark the commencement of a period of further consultation with staff about these proposals. Already, as discussions have begun with overseas bureaux staff, there have been adjustments and refinements to the details, and this will continue. There will also be more details available next week on the remuneration proposals, outlining the benchmarking work that has been done and the way in which remuneration will be structured.

The guiding principles as we move through the consultative process will be to ensure the international news gathering operations of the ABC are operating efficiently and effectively, and to maintain our commitment to the quality of our coverage.

Kate Torney

Director of News