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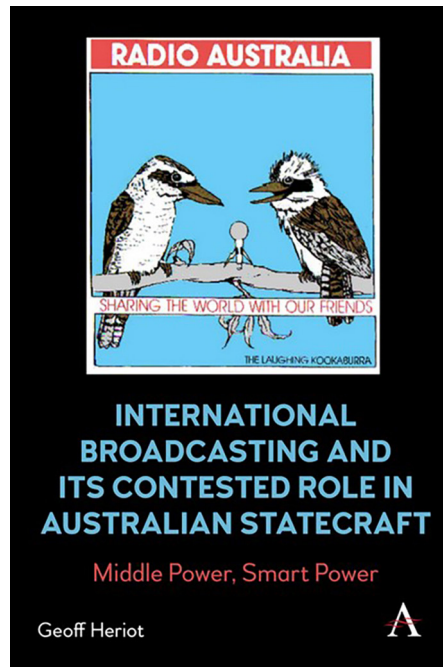
A fascinating, timely account of ABC 'soft power'

International Broadcasting and Its Contested Role in Australian Statecraft; Middle Power, Smart Power, by Geoff Heriot. Melbourne, VIC: Anthem Press. 2023. 292 pages. ISBN 9781839985058.

IN MAY 2023, Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs Penny Wong announced what she called a 'transformational package of support' for the Pacific, including money for infrastructure, security and criminal justice. It came amid growing competition with China in the Pacific.

Included in the package was a promise to 'leverage' Australia's strengths, including broadcasting (and sports links), as part of an Indo-Pacific Broadcasting Strategy, enabling more Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) members to access Australian content. Australian external broadcasting was firmly back in the spotlight.

A new book, *International Broadcasting and Its Contested Role in Australian Statecraft; Middle Power, Smart Power*, by Geoff Heriot, arrives with perfect timing. It is a fascinating, timely and challenging account of



Australia's attempts to project itself through broadcasting, largely on the ABC international feed to countries in the region.

After World War Two, the ABC's Radio Australia held a place just below the behemoths of international broadcasting, like the BBC (Britain) and Voice of America (USA), aiming firstly at countries of Southeast Asia and the Pacific, says Heriot. But the years after the Cold War when history was meant to have ended, with the US the sole hegemon, and in the age of CNN providing a global reach, the importance of the ABC's international work became less certain.

Funding rose and fell. Now the question of providing content feeds, whether by broadcasting or digital means, is exercising governments,

including Australia and neighbouring New Zealand.

If anyone is well placed to examine the role of the ABC it is Geoff Heriot. A former ABC correspondent (1974-1977), he was head of news and current affairs for Radio Australia, then held two key executive roles, manager of ABC corporate strategy (1996-1998) and chief of corporate planning and governance (2000-2008).

He is a consultant in media and governance and completed a PhD at the University of Tasmania. His book is based on the research, but is hugely informed by his understanding of both the ABC and its role, and the expectations of successive Australian governments.

Heriot creates a substantial framework by which to analyse transnational broadcasting.

He argues the purpose of international broadcasting is to provide a space in which power relations can be contested through a marketplace of ideas. In other words, the broadcaster engages audiences with content which infuses discussion with a credible Australian narrative.

Heriot applies three success factors for the performance of a broadcaster. First is the way it represents the values and interests of the country. Just as importantly is his second point that it has to reach across different cultures and nations to engage people successfully. And lastly, is the way all its practices, arrangements and policies help it to achieve that—or not.

These are then applied to six

functions which could be expected of a broadcaster, like the ABC. They include engaging foreign audiences (even during periods of tension), challenging any ‘cartels’ of information so an Australian narrative reaches an audience, countering disinformation, contributing to peaceful region building, helping develop regional media architecture, and responding quickly to crises within the area.

Heriot is especially good in moving along the entire length of an international broadcaster’s purpose and work, from the expectations of government, and the laws and policies by which the broadcaster must operate, through the internal arrangements and discussions of what to do, through the way the content is received or understood in the country receiving it. He has clearly experienced and studied every link in the chain.

He is especially strong in discussing how the messages produced in one cultural setting will be perceived once transmitted to another. In the case of the ABC, how a flow of news meant to demonstrate Australia’s commitment to the rule of law, for example, will be understood by listeners in another cultural context.

The second half of *International Broadcasting* shifts gears to applying the frameworks to the history of the ABC, mostly during the Cold War but also during the Gulf War 1990 when Australians were taken hostage in Kuwait. Heriot is particularly strong in looking at the ABC’s role in broadcasting to Indonesia, ‘the crucible’ as he

calls it, including at times of tension.

He has an insider's knowledge, backed by extensive research into primary sources, of the tensions between governments and the ABC, and within the organisation itself. The cast of characters is recognisable today. There are government ministers, trying to uphold free speech and the independence of the ABC, while irritated at its reporting. Or ambassadors complaining the broadcaster's stories are making their job more difficult. These are also journalists and leaders struggling to adapt as the world changes.

Now, in a contested Pacific, the place of the ABC is under the spotlight again. Geoff Heriot's work is timely and illuminating of the issues facing the country and its public broadcaster. His framework is closely argued; his historical chapters insightful and entertaining.

Heriot's framework and case studies are useful in themselves, but doubly important now that the issue of Australian soft power to counter China in Asia and the Pacific is back strongly on the political agenda.

A tribute to OWEN WILKES

AN OUTSTANDING NZ PEACE ACTIVIST

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