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Journalists and the Stirring of Australian Public Diplomacy

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This chapter is a historical case study of public diplomacy spluttering into life. It focuses on the Colombo Plan for aid to South and Southeast Asia which began in the middle of 1951 and continues, in diminished form, today. From an Australian perspective, the Colombo Plan can be seen as one of the few positive aspects of official policy towards this part of Asia during the 1950s and 1960s—and rightly so, given the success of government-sponsored education and training opportunities for Asian students to come to Australia—but the question of how Australians adjusted their behaviour to meet changing expectations that grew with the Colombo Plan requires further investigation. The case study I explore here, of a government-endorsed journalists' tour of South and Southeast Asia in 1958–59, is instructive both for what it reveals about a dawning sense the power of popularly digested stories and images to work two ways—at home and overseas—and also for the emergence of what might be called a human-story
aspect of cultural internationalism, associated with the Colombo Plan.¹

Those Australians most closely associated with the Colombo Plan in the early and mid-1950s were not slow to embark on information initiatives associated with it. As several historians have shown, and as David Walker has reminded us in relation to the Cheap Books scheme, those working with the public relations trained Minister for External Affairs Richard Casey launched ambitious information activities. An interdepartmental Overseas Planning Committee formed in 1955 oversaw many of these, emphasizing in its guidelines that Australia should be known as a non-threatening power that was also facing development challenges.² There was a Cold War "struggle for hearts and minds" dimension to some these, especially in the crafting of Radio Australia broadcasts and stories for Hemisphere, the new Asian/Australian student magazine, and the provision of radio transmitters and receivers from the mid-1950s through the mid-1960s.³ Partly for reasons of limited budgets and partly as a result

1 Here I am relying on Akira Iriye's description of the evolution of internationalism, with cultural internationalism, "the idea that internationalism may best be fostered through cross-national cultural communication, understanding and co-operation" being a major feature of 20th century internationalism—Akira Iriye, Cultural Internationalism and World Order, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997, p. 27 and passim.

2 "Cold War – Outline Notes – Working Paper" (author unknown), 23 September 1955, CRS A 7452 item A359, NAA.

of needs analyses, the Australians placed particular emphasis on sponsored studentships and traineeships—and these became the subject of much information dissemination.

The role of journalists in general began to attract more attention; and Australia's Colombo Plan budget provided for a team of Indian newspaper editors to tour Australia, the first tour of its kind, in 1957. In the same year, the regular meeting of members of the Colombo Plan's Consultative Committee marked something of a new era in information activity. It featured strong consensus that members should do more to disseminate information about the plan through established information media—the press, radio and, where possible, television. This meeting came at the end of the first phase of the plan, and so constituted something of a report card on the six-year development plans begun in 1951. Although the range of achievements and the effectiveness of aid programs varied considerably, as some nations joined the scheme later than others, there was a strong general desire to renew commitments and embark on second phase aid programs; and so the Colombo Plan began to undergo transformation from its post-war and post-independence circumstances to something more enduring, based on ongoing partnerships. The renewal and transformation also meant ongoing commitments by donor nations and next phase economic development and training efforts in recipient members; and so developed a consensus on the need to carry the good word about the plan's projects further, both at home and overseas. Information with a capital "I" was crucial to a broader-based acceptance among peoples of both donor and recipient

nations, of this transformation of the Colombo Plan from post-war experiment to longer-term partnerships between the so-called "old Commonwealth" nations, Japan and the United States, and developing nations of South and Southeast Asia (noting that some countries were both donors and beneficiaries of aid).

The Colombo Plan therefore prompted the mobilisation of a new multi-national group of cultural ambassadors, the National Information Officers of participating countries. The first meeting of national information officers was in September 1958, in Singapore and was attended by representatives from seventeen member countries as well as the UN Department of Information, the WHO, and the Colombo Plan Bureau. The timing of the conference was important. Members were excited that the first film about the Colombo Plan, footage compiled in India from several sources, was due for release the next month; and it was to be followed by another made in Japan, with more from other members scheduled.

Hunter Wade, the young New Zealand-born Director of the Colombo Plan Bureau, opened the conference with the declaration that although there was much that governments could boast in relation to the Colombo Plan, information work was about more than this; indeed it was "an integral part of the machinery of national development." He argued that sustained national development would only come about through individual and collective enterprise and this depended on thorough levels of understanding and discussion of the tasks at hand. More than others, Wade stressed the need to think of information as being at the heart of aid endeavours:

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To the extent the information activity in an underdeveloped country can help mobilize popular support for a vigorous programme of economic and social development, it is a productive activity of the utmost importance. In the same way, the work of information officers in the more highly developed countries can help to build up public support for a programme of technical assistance and capital aid to the less developed countries. Both of these aspects of information work are of concern to the Colombo Plan which, in its widest sense, consists of the application of a blend of national effort and external aid to the development programmes of the countries of the Colombo Plan area.6

Thereafter, delegates spent three and a half days feeling their way (this was, after all, the first meeting of its kind) through discussions about information technology and capacity and strategies, according to very different levels of capability among members. Chairman of the conference, Singapore’s George Thomson, paid tribute to the collegiality and energy on display, marveling at delegates’ capacity to reach the end of a full day and then face up to ten courses of Chinese food.7

Leader of the Australian delegation and head of the Australian News and Information Bureau, Mel Pratt stressed how much of his work was directed towards publicizing Colombo Plan achievements and drew heavily on Colombo Plan students for its human interest factor. The results took the form of press reports,

6 The Colombo Plan Conference of National Information Officers, op. cit., Wade’s vote of thanks at Opening Ceremony, p. 50.
films, photographs, radio stories and print booklets, and Pratt acknowledged the potential of television in Asia in years to come.\(^8\)

Not surprisingly, there were limits to what member nations might do by way of increased publicity. Many of those recipients of aid had underdeveloped communications infrastructure and were building cohorts of journalists able to transmit messages to diverse groups within their populations. Partly for this reason (and partly due to a shortage of newsprint), there was a tendency to invest big hopes in the power of the moving image. Films about the Colombo Plan would be able to transcend problems of literacy and stretch imaginations beyond local preoccupations. Representatives from donor countries such as Australia, Canada and UK promised more assistance with the production, distribution and showing of films, and their enthusiasm was shared by Indian delegate, M. L. Bhardwaj (also Government Registrar of Newspapers) and Colombo Plan Information Officer, R. K. Chatterjee—but recommendations embraced the full range of print, poster, film and radio efforts.\(^9\) Towards the end of the meeting, delegates discussed a proposal from the Singapore delegation for there being declared a Colombo Plan Day for celebration in member countries, as another stage of conscious-raising. This idea enjoyed a mixed reception, with the Australian Mel Pratt amongst the most enthusiastic. In fact, so enthusiastic was Pratt that he vowed to recommend it to his government whether or not it was taken up by others.\(^10\)

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As the Singapore conference of Information Officers was winding up, an Australian venture in information and publicity was taking shape. The Australian Department of External Affairs had secured the services of former war correspondent, Osmar White and cameraman James Fitzpatrick, to undertake an extended tour of Colombo Plan nations in South and Southeast Asia, for around six months, in order to collect human interest stories for newspaper features—and the department had worked hard to secure syndication of stories among almost all of the major dailies in Australia; and to produce a booklet or booklets dealing with Australia's activities under the Colombo Plan. It was a grand tour with some elaborate orchestration, and a good touch of nerves in External Affairs about what the strong-willed White might discover and end up in his stories. White and Fitzpatrick started their tour in Pakistan in December 1958 before making their way eastwards through the subcontinent towards Southeast Asia. By the time they completed their final visit, in Indonesia, they had toured all but two of the nations (Brunei and Laos) to which Australia was then providing aid.

The pace of the trip and the vagaries of weather and officialdom in different countries made it grueling, even for White, who reported from Papua New Guinea during the Second World War. Jim Fitzpatrick wrote to his boss several updates in weary but defiant voice, listing significant filming and photography after being "whisked off on another bloody tiring trip some 500 miles to the north [of Bangkok] by jeeps, lorries and little

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11 Record of Conversation in Dept of External Affairs, "Visit of Journalist and Photographer to South and South East Asia," 4 November 1958, CRS A6895 item N58/134 part 1, NAA.

In addition to working hand-in-hand with White for newspaper features and planned moving picture films, Fitzpatrick kept shooting film for the Colombo Plan Library, too. His meeting, early on the tour, with the determined R. K. Chatterjee, no doubt contributed to this addition to the mission. He, more than White, was working as an ambassador for cultural internationalism, as he stretched beyond his government’s brief. The two men were, in White’s words, “the only two-man cinema circus extant.”

In general, White was mostly sanguine about the impact of the Colombo Plan in South Asia and more encouraged by what he saw in Southeast Asia. From the Galle Face Hotel in Colombo two months into the tour, he wrote of having to restrain his newspaper man’s instinct to “scream his head off and be damned to the consequences” in relation to what he saw in Pakistan and India. There were a number of reasons behind this, not least White’s lack of experience in South Asia, his culture shock at the extent of poverty he saw, his frustration with local officials, and the seeming insignificance of small amounts of Australian aid in this bigger picture. After something of a personal struggle, in which he seriously thought about going with instinct and penning savage accounts of waste, neglect and ineffectiveness in Pakistan and India, he adjusted to the novelty of what he was seeing and doing; and, with Casey’s encouragement, adopted a compromise blend of reporting problems while anticipating better results ahead.

13 Fitzpatrick’s letter to Pratt, Bangkok, 9 April 1959, CRS A6895 item N58/134 part 2, NAA.
14 R. K. Chatterjee’s letter to Kevin Murphy, 9 March 1959, CRS A6895 item N58/134 part 2, NAA.
15 Osmar White’s letter to Kevin Murphy, 27 February 1959, CRS A6895 item N58/134 part 2, NAA.
16 Osmar White, op. cit.
The many stories published in Australian newspapers then, met External Affairs' expectations admirably. Privately, as a former war correspondent, and someone who readily embraced Cold War polarity as a basis for Australia’s efforts in Asia, White was inclined to slip into half-flippant, rapidly-dating discourses and see the Colombo Plan as “the only effective weapon our mob has against the Comms in the Mysterious East.” To be fair to White, Moscow had launched a vigorous propaganda campaign in South Asia, and had undoubtedly enjoyed a Sputnik shot of extra momentum from October 1957. And to be fair to Canberra, before White and Fitzpatrick set off on their tour, Australian External Affairs officials had tried to play down the Cold War factor. In a pre-departure briefing, External Affairs officer Colin Moodie had steered conversation away from communism and from the idea of “buying goodwill.” Moodie had stressed the value of the Colombo Plan in generating personal relationships between Asians and Australians.

White’s analysis of the impact of the Colombo Plan was encouraging but sobering. His official report listed problems that led to waste of money, machinery or trainers’ time, but was generally upbeat about the effect of the Colombo Plan on Australia’s standing in the region—but at the level of officials and the educated elite rather than more broadly. While the Colombo Plan might counter some of the resentment generated by the “white Australia” policy, it was less likely to do so where another significant grievance arose—such as Australia’s resistance to Indonesian sovereignty in West New Guinea. And, longer term, he wrote, “Small Australian gifts to worthy enterprises of institutions

17 Osmar White’s letter to Kevin Murphy, 27 February 1959, op. cit.
18 Record of conversation, between Moodie, White, Murphy and Pratt, and three other DEA officers, 4 November 1958, CRS A6895 item N58/134 part 1, NAA.
do not appear to have much psycho-political effect, or to have much chance of creating such an effect unless their human interest value is exploited by a skilled, long-term programme of publicity and information."\(^\text{19}\)

The print output for the tour was directed heavily towards Australians. In addition to the regular news stories that appeared in several dailies, The Seed of Freedom booklet went to 20,000 State Schools in Australia, as well as a long list of libraries, youth and student groups, trade unions, churches, banks and parliaments.\(^\text{20}\)

It was published in 1961, coinciding with the tenth anniversary of the Colombo Plan. Some 50,000 were initially produced for Australia; and a run of 20,000 was tailored for Malaya, Singapore and the Borneo Territories. In his foreword to the book, Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies wrote of the need to get beneath the blueprints and statistics that dominated reports on the Colombo Plan and to recover the "human element." White's text and Fitzpatrick's photographs did just this. The opening pages of the booklet stressed the havoc wreaked by the Second World War, and, in a nod to the non-aligned movement, the logical emergence of new relationships and the threat of nuclear war. In particular, before moving to the particular needs and projects making up the "plan," White wrote of a "new concept of internationalism" as means of orientation beyond imperialism and Cold War;

The old internationalism of empire was based on the political and economic subordination of subject peoples. The new ideological internationalism of Communism holds out the promise of economic and social development by

\(^\text{19}\) "Colombo Plan Survey for Australian Press," report by Osmar White (undated, 1959), CRS B142 item 58/31.

\(^\text{20}\) G. N. Upton, DEA, to K. Murphy, ANIB, 13 March 1961, CRS A6895 item N58/164, NAA; Upton to K. Murphy, 15 March 1961, op. cit.
abandoning all forms of political freedom and by abolishing the individual's right of economic choice. The Colombo Plan postulates that an alternative internationalism is possible—the internationalism of mutual aid and cooperation without the sacrifice of freedom.  

The connection between human interest stories and the new internationalism was popular refrain by this time, in both Australian and Colombo Plan meetings. As Phillip Jones, representing Sarawak at the 1958 Information Officers meeting put it, "One student, one teacher, is for our present publicity purposes worth a dozen reactors and dams which cannot by any means yet be made to touch the hearts and minds of the people."  

Australia's much-heralded Colombo Plan tour yielded rich returns in film. Three extracts from *The Builders*, the main documentary film produced, were syndicated to the British and Canadian Broadcasting Commissions, the NHK National Network of Japan, and one extract traveled to Switzerland, the Netherlands, France and Mexico. The full film became a television documentary screened throughout North America and Europe, and by March 1960 it had reached fifteen European nations. So, a potential audience of 75 million viewers heard the narrator conclude by celebrating the four freedoms as the basis for the region's future, and gesture towards a new pluralism;  

The people of South, and of South-East Asia, are climbing out of the valley. Out of the valley of the past into a future of their own building. A building in which we, their friends and neighbours, are playing a part. This future  

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22 The Colombo Plan Conference of National Information Officers, op. cit., p. 84.
has its roots and foundations in freedom to worship, each after his own fashion; to give praise and thanks for the gift of life in a world of widening horizons.23

As the above list of countries suggests, it was easier to use outside of Asia, as the attempt to capture stories from many locations meant that official of any particular member nation was likely to feel that their experiences should have enjoyed greater prominence. Again, Australian schools were the main beneficiaries of renewed emphasis on internal distribution.24

As a moment in documentary film-making this was a pioneering one. Jim Fitzpatrick had been recruited to take still photos that would accompany White’s newspaper articles. It was only an act of bravado that led him to lug along a movie camera, in the hope that he might be able to cajole White into making a two-man team do the work of what normally took eight. Although it is White’s reporting of the trip, and White’s newspaper stories, that dominate the record, Fitzpatrick’s achievement in shooting and sending thousands of hours of film material back was extraordinary. There was no budget for it, but the sheer volume of high quality material demanded attention; and upon return, Fitzpatrick managed to secure funds for both commentary and a musical score by the Sydney Symphonic Orchestra.25 Again, the Colombo Plan proved adept at precipitating cultural exchange that might otherwise have felt too hard.

23 K. Fraser to Mel Pratt, 7 May 1959, CRS A6895 item 58/134 part 2, NAA; J. S. Allen to Director ANIB, 10 March 1960, op. cit.; text of narration for The Builders, undated, op. cit.

24 John Murray (ANIB) to Lionel Wigmore, Australian High Commission, New Delhi, 14 September 1960, CRS A 6895 item N58/165 part 2, NAA.

Reflections

At a very general level, these activities matched the transition process of the Colombo Plan changing from postwar, post-independence to a more amorphous yet serious series of longer term partnerships. The Australian emphasis on education and training had a logic that was specific to circumstances; but, in a broader realm, it also straddled US President Harry Truman's Point Four aid initiative of 1949, bringing aid and scientific progress to countries most in need, and the later flurry of educational and intellectual exchange programs in the 1970s, taking shape in the German-Marshall Fund, the Japan Foundation and other new organizations. What I have tentatively called human-stroy cultural internationalism was in part a response to the problem of managing geography, cultural difference and potentially soporific macro-economics in digestible way; and it carried a broader liberal impulse that survived and flourished after the Second World War into optimism about the impact of advances in communications technology to ab call kar kethe kind of enthusiasm that relished wider use of the telephone, radio and cinema, and that awaited satellites to make simultaneous world-wide television viewing possible, as the Our World program achieved in 1967.

Connecting this case study of pioneering journalists in the late 1950s to current conversations about public diplomacy is arguably more ambitious; but something of a pathway is offered by Nicholas Cull's work connecting 45 years of the US Information Agency's work with key themes that run through most contemporary discussions. Cull's five core components of successful engaging with foreign publics are: listening; advocacy; cultural diplomacy; exchange diplomacy; and international broadcasting.26

There are three big differences between Cull’s exploration of the USIA and information activity linked to the Colombo Plan in the late 1950s–early 1960s. One is the difficulty for Australians to address more than an educated elite with English literacy—translation of print materials was expanding but only in recent years and not in volumes suggesting confidence. The lack of developed information infrastructure in many countries is another key difference. Print material, machinery relating to film, photography radio, and the power generation on which all of these depended, were at much lower levels than existed, for example, in communist Europe.

And the persuasive effort directed internally, at Australians, marks the White–Fitzpatrick tour as substantially different from Cull’s USIA. In addition to those who knew too little, there was a critical public—or at least critical voices of influence—in Australia in the background to the White and Fitzpatrick tour. Newspaper editors grew anxious about spending on the Colombo Plan in the late 1950s. In particular, one disgruntled Australian, former UN Food and Agricultural Organisation adviser, Reginald Cunningham, was a persistent complainant about waste under the Colombo Plan. Cunningham was actually trying hard to have himself appointed as an overseer of Australian aid, having fallen in love with the idea of living in Pakistan. In the meantime, during 1958, he became more vocal in press and on radio in Australia, creating headaches for External Affairs officers.27 Not surprisingly, then,

External Affairs saw the White-Fitzpatrick tour as an opportunity "to convince potential Australian critics of the value of the Plan in addition to informing the people in Australia who wanted to know something about it."  

In the wake of the tour, at the next meeting of Colombo Plan Information Officers, in 1960, Australians were able to boast "The Seed of Freedom" as a major contribution to the tenth anniversary approaching; list more visits by and training for, Asian journalists, and boast translation of press material and pamphlets into Thai, Malay, Urdu, Tamil, Vietnamese and Chinese languages. The Australians were committed to news around anniversaries; not just the Colombo Plan's tenth, but the arrival of the 1000th Colombo Plan trainee, the 2000th trainee, and other milestones that could be found. They were, by the early 1960s, very familiar with the notion of the journalists' "hook" on which to hang a story.

Finally, it is important not to equate the amount of Australia's information activity in Asia with a sea-change in official attitudes, implying broad embrace of racial pluralism. This shift of mindset would come more gradually over the next decade, and, taking a cue from White and Fitzpatrick, we might credit the Colombo Plan efforts as "Builders" of bridges between the more liberal internationalists in Australia and the more Cold War realists. But there is a sense of becoming pro-active in Asia (the term "follow-

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28 Record of conversation, between Moodie, White, Murphy and Pratt, and three other DEA officers, 4 November 1958, CRS A6895 item N58/134 part 1, NAA.

29 Australian Answers to questionnaire, Colombo Plan Conference of National Information Officers, Bangkok, 5-8 September 1960, CRS A 6895 item N60/29, NAA.
up” was emphasized in External Affairs’ hoped for the tour)\(^{30}\) that warrants exploration of the late 1950s–early 1960s in terms of public diplomacy.

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\(^{30}\) “Colombo Plan – Visit by Journalist to South and South East Asia,” Moodie to various posts in South and Southeast Asia, 19 September 1958, CRS A6895 item N58/134/part 1, NAA.