

## **Escaping the "Tyranny of Distance?"**

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Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey has described his nation as afflicted by the "tyranny of distance". Since the famous term was coined, his contemporaries have debated whether distance is a good or a bad thing as a young nation peopled mainly by migrants forges an identity, and struggles to understand the remote world stage - and the part Australia should play. Yet for journalists, it's difficult to view distance as anything but a disadvantage. So often the themes of the times - from asylum seekers to talk of a social justice package for the country's indigenous people - are played out in relative isolation. The same Australian voices dominate and drive debates; while in-depth discussion of how other countries handle similar issues is obscured by distance and indifference. Even basic logistical issues like contacting talent in time zones up to 16 hours behind Australia affects our ability to position stories in an international context. Undoubtedly, the greatest experience of my six months with DW was exposure to international perspectives on topics I'd covered for years at home. Suddenly, I was watching events as they unfolded, in the same time zone, and with the geographical proximity to interview key players. A month after September 11, I arrived in Geneva to package a feature story on the impending refugee crisis in Afghanistan and the wider ongoing issue of illegal migrants. At the time, Australia was under heavy fire from the UN over its treatment of the Tampa boat people. Debate was also raging across Europe on this issue, with particular sensitivity between Britain and France over which nation should accept responsibility for illegal arrivals attempting to cross the channel. In Geneva, I conducted lengthy interviews with officials from a range of humanitarian and Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), including the Red Cross, the International Organisation for Migration, and the UN.

At length, we discussed responsibilities facing the West, considered intensive research on how the issue was likely to develop and compared the responses of a range of countries. As I began transcribing the interviews, I reflected how rarely the larger picture of the illegal movement of people is presented in Australia. Of course we learn of yet another sensationalised arrival of boat people on foreign shores. But we hear little about the ongoing struggles of other countries to achieve a balance between acting fairly and stemming the flow of those desperate for a better life. It's often simply too expensive for Australian news organisations to regularly offer international trips to specialist reporters capable of devoting the time and resources to informed and ongoing coverage of complex topics. For an Australian journalist, it was also striking to observe my European colleagues reporting within the context of the growing sense of a modern European Community. This was clearly evident during the Afghan peace talks, hosted by the German Government at the St Petersburg Guesthouse in Konigswinter. The direct purpose of the talks was to agree on an interim Afghan ruling administration prior to free elections. The talks were further enlivened by debate over the role Europe - and in particular Germany - should play in terms of providing aid and peace-keeping forces in Afghanistan. These questions obviously carried a lot of historical baggage, and represented yet another turning point in the path of reunified Germany. A few months later, reading William L. Shirer's *This Is Berlin*, I discovered that British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain had stayed at the St Petersburg

Guesthouse when he met with Hitler prior to the outbreak of World War II. A few days before the visit, the American radio correspondent William L. Shirer had driven down to St Petersburg to dutifully describe the gentle Rhine scenery. In great detail, he also examined the decor and outlook of the room where Chamberlain would stay. It was a powerful reminder of the rapidity of events and change in Europe over the past century. The sense of a strong European Community was epitomised by the culture of DW, which broadcasts in over 30 languages. Alongside European journalists, the service also embraces African and Asian journalists, offering the opportunity to work and live in Germany, while broadcasting back into their own countries in their own languages. It is worth noting the freedom and support DW offers journalists - particularly important to those from wartorn nations - to explore and report openly on just about any topic they wish. Such rare international workplaces also foster an informed and creative environment for journalists, where ideas and attitudes are constantly tested. It tends to add a welcome element of surprise to office life. My favourite expression of this was in the DW lifts, which were something of a cultural lottery. One morning I went up to work with a group of Indian women dressed in bright saris and dripping with gold. At 6pm I came down with the French desk amid the rustle of silk scarves and lashings of Chanel scent. Another strange effect borne of the tyranny of distance is that Australians tend to consume myths about other countries - often dispelled shortly after arrival. My as yet unwritten story is: 'German Efficiency: the Great Myth'. True, Germans are mostly punctual, well-organised, and like to do things by the book. But apart from this, I was sadly disappointed. Like any other country, trains ran late, S-bahn and U-bahn trams ran even later - while buses bore the universal hallmarks of lack of punctuality and even complete failure to arrive, especially during torrential downpours. Contrary to my hope I was to spend six months in a paradise of efficiency, I quickly discovered Germany has its lion's share of slow-moving queues and bureaucratic bungles. An Australian colleague was in hearty agreement with my examples of inefficiency; albeit her research was more specific. She'd done a survey of beers on offer. "They call themselves efficient," she scoffed as she tore her hands trying to remove yet another stubborn beer lid with no bottle opener handy. "And yet this is a country that hasn't even invented the twist-top! I mean at least we've got that!" I don't quite know how that would fit into Blainey's theory of the tyranny of distance.