

A New Screen Face for Public Service Broadcasting

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Abstract

The contemporary broadcasting industry is characterised by technological and social change, it is increasingly competitive, and the media industry is fragmenting. New services need not necessarily compete with existing free-to-air broadcasting but could act as further incentive for audiences to invest in new equipment. New equipment will be necessary in the future as set out under the Television Broadcasting Services (Digital Conversion) Act 2000 (Cth), before the planned switch-off of analogue broadcasts planned for this year but now likely to be 2013. By then, however, audiences might already have migrated to the online environment for television and radio content as well as other services. Those that produce and deliver programs via free-to-air broadcasting need to consider what audiences do with new media in order to engage them. This will be an ongoing process as technology and audience expectations continue to change. Against such a background, this article examines how Australia's public broadcasters are responding to the new media environment. It will consider their interactive online programs and services with specific analysis of ABC's new 'iView' and 'ABC Fora' which offer content on-demand. It will also examine SBS online initiatives. I wish to argue that the new media offer public broadcasters new prospects to provide forums and spaces for education, entertainment, public discussion and interaction online.

Keywords

public service broadcasting, television, new media, online

Introduction

New media technologies allow news organisations to transmit information almost instantaneously and audiences have come to expect immediate coverage of news events and content on demand (Craig, 2005: 6). Where once the print news industry might publish a morning and evening newspaper organisations such as Fairfax in Australia have now installed

24-hour news-desks making possible the constant collection of information and thus immediate news distribution. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) once broadcast its news in static time-slots but now is moving to install a similar hub through which journalists can publish directly to the web, radio or television making possible the planned integration of all media in a single output operation where audiences can access information live or on-demand. Indeed, the contemporary broadcasting industry is characterised by technological and social change, it is increasingly competitive, and the media industry is fragmenting as the opportunities for content niching expand. An Australian Bureau of Statistics report of June 2008 indicates that internet use in Australian homes is considerable (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008: 1). Of Australia's 8.3 million households¹, a significant 6.21 million households were active internet subscribers. In comparison to television use, according to internet measurement company, Nielsen Online, Australian internet use has taken over television viewing for the first time (Nielsen, 2008:1). A Cisco commissioned study found similar results reporting that where an average of 14 hours was spent viewing television, 22 hours were spent on the internet (Hendrey, 2008). Clearly, those that produce and deliver programs via free-to-air broadcasting need to consider what audiences do with new media in order to engage them. This will be an ongoing process as technology and audience expectations continue to change.

What content producers do recognise is that the internet is a place where users are active participants and one of their chief activities is searching for information, which as Stovall (2004:3) pointed out, must be current, immediate—often as events are unfolding, and interactive. The choices on the internet are built into portal pages themselves, using hyperlinks. Hyperlinked content allows users to explore a story in a non-linear narrative, where the outcomes of a story may be unchanged, but the path the user has taken is random (Bucy, 2005: 68). Despite this level of active involvement, however, is evidence of continuity in the mass audience (see for example von Hasebrink, 1997; Krotz and von Hasebrink, 1998). As McQuial (2005: 450) makes clear:

At the present time ... it is too early to conclude that the mass audience will fade away. It still exists, albeit in somewhat new forms, and the mass media industries have shown a remarkable capacity to survive in familiar forms.

¹ The figure of 8.3 million households in Australia is a projected figure and comes from the 1301.0 - Year Book Australia, 2005, p 3. The number of active internet subscribers does not include business or government subscribers.

Indeed, of Australian television networks, the ABC has been a leader in the use of innovative technologies and at the forefront in the original migration online. Over ten years ago, the ABC established a Multimedia Unit (MMU) in July 1995 as a means to initiate and coordinate multimedia activities within the organisation. The MMU coordinated various multimedia projects and educational CD-ROM titles and internet services were developed. Between 1994 and 1995, a secure connection to the internet was established in preparation for the launch of ABC Online services (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2000). The role of the MMU was to integrate the production process and set the editorial standards and guidelines, and to organise the structure of ABC Online (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2009). The restructuring of the ABC in December 1996 saw the MMU located within the National Networks portfolio, and ABC Online was made the new unit for content output (ABC, 2000: 11).

In terms of uniqueness, SBS Online provides text and video services as well as audio-on-demand in sixty-eight languages, making it the most linguistically diverse website in the world (SBS, 2002).

As active participants, audiences also demand gatekeeping and editorial guidance when online according to McQuail (2005: 139). Here the public broadcasters have an advantage due to their public interest obligations as set out in the respective Charters of the ABC and SBS². That is, public broadcasting aims to achieve certain goals in the interest of various publics. Both the ABC and SBS have charters that essentially outline their individual obligations as being to inform, educate and entertain—to benefit and please. To these are the added State duties to develop a sense of nationhood and promote an informed citizenry. Public service broadcasters also have an advantage online over many of their commercially driven counterparts and un-mediated user-generated content providers in terms of the reliability, accuracy and the trustworthiness of globally on-demand content. As Debrett (2007:7) makes clear:

As trusted brands renowned for their independence, public service broadcasters acquire new premium in the online environment where unaccredited and unreliable information proliferates. Publicly funded media remain best positioned to develop content that will make news and current affairs appealing to youth and also address the digital divide by driving digital uptake, providing popular and quality content.

² Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983 (Cth) and the Special Broadcasting Service Act 1991 (Cth). ANZCA09 *Communication, Creativity and Global Citizenship*: Refereed Proceedings: <http://anzca09.org>

Against such a background, this article examines how Australia's public broadcasters' are responding to the new media environment. Among other examples, it will consider their interactive online initiatives with specific analysis of ABC's new 'iView' and 'ABC Fora' and key SBS ventures which offer content on-demand. I wish to argue that the new media offer public broadcasters new prospects to provide forums and spaces for education, entertainment, public discussion and interaction online. I hasten to add that iView and ABC Fora are not more important than other current offerings of ABC Online that have allowed the public broadcaster to develop a unique and distinctive role via the internet³. They are, however, more recent developments that warrant critical evaluation in light of the ways that the public broadcasters are becoming on-demand media content providers.

Public Broadcasting: Embracing the Web

While digital ABC2 and SBS Television channels largely offer repeat television programming, some interesting events are occurring online⁴. Both ABC Online and sbs.com.au promote their television and radio programs on their websites. The user sees still colour images from these television programs and their radio programs' logos. The user is able to watch or listen to selections of television and radio programs online, access a full list of radio and television schedules and special events. In the case of the ABC's news homepage, NewsOnline, (www.abc.net.au/news/default.htm), there are internal links to ABC news bulletins by a broadband or dial-up connection. It is possible to listen to or view live news stories using 'Windows Media' and 'Real Media' software. Currently, the ABC is trialing a beta mobile service so that users can view ABC content via the mobile phone when they enter the ABC's web address into their mobile phone browser. Further encouraging audiences to engage with the new media is the ability for users to send their own newsworthy images, video, audio or written eye-witness accounts to the ABC for inclusion (subject to suitability) in news stories. This is becoming an additional resource for journalists: "rather than simply publishing a news product and sitting back and waiting for tomorrow's deadline, online journalists seem to feel that their medium has a much more reciprocal relationship with its audience" (Craig, 2005: 25). Moreover, should information on the website need updating users can provide local and timely information to the content providers. While journalists

³ For further analysis of the public broadcasters' initiatives online see T Cinque, 'The ABC and SBS Online: From Portal to Vortal', *Communication, Civics, Industry, Australian and New Zealand Communication Association (ANZCA) and La Trobe University, 2007*, <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/ANZCA2007/proceedings.html>

⁴ ABC2 primarily offers repeat programming of ABC1 (the ABC's original television channel now re-branded). It does, however, have some limited content in genre timeslots such as music and children's programming which appeals to certain viewers.

might have access to timely information or news events it still needs to be moderated for accuracy.

Certainly, the ABC Online and SBS.com.au are encouraging their audiences to become aware of and embrace new delivery methods such as the internet by enabling people to understand the 'interactive medium' that operates across various platforms. As well as through the use of vetted user-generated content, it also occurs where television shows are linked to online (internet) content offering discussion in forums, transcripts of program material, extended footage and news. This practice has, however, been criticised as little more than cross media promotion of conventional media forms, rather than concern to deliver something new or innovative, as discussed by Seiter (2000: 231):

For its part television plays a crucial role as publiciser of the web and computer use. Television programs are already filled with references to computers and the internet that both dramatise the importance of the new technologies and attempt to play a major role in educating the public about new media.

An examination of ABCOnline and sbs.com.au found homepages now appearing on the public broadcasters' websites that exist as online content alone and not as repeats of their on-air parent program⁵. While these homepages might contain internal links to related on-air programming, there are examples of stand-alone, online-only hypertext. Examples of this include the ABC's Science Online (www.abc.net.au/science) and the Health and Wellbeing homepage (www.abc.net.au/health). The ABC's Hyperstrumpet, a collection of comments, critiques and links, is completely unconnected to on-air media programs (www.abc.net.au/arts/hyperstrumpet), as is the interactive graphic novel about William Bligh (<http://www.abc.net.au/bligh>). SBS's Digital information homepage is also self-contained and unconnected to on-air programs (although some external links lead to other broadcasters' websites, they do not go directly to particular programs). Here, from this perspective, simply repeating on-air content online alone will not satisfy all cyber-viewers of the future. Needs and expectations are changing as skills with information and communications technologies (ICTs) continue to improve⁶.

⁵ For more descriptive information about the web-only ABC sites see T Cinque, 'ABC Online: A Vortal for New Opportunities?', *Australian Journal of Communication*, 34(3), 2007, pp 85-100.

⁶ On Australians' internet access see Australian Bureau of Statistics (2002). *Measuring Australia's Progress*. Available at URL: www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/; date accessed: 16 July 2004; and Australian Bureau of Statistics (2003). *Household Use of Information Technology*, Catalogue no. 8146.0, October.

Hypertext is a term coined by Theodore Nelson in 1965⁷. Nelson was a peripatetic thinker and was looking for a way to interconnect the thousands of ideas that he had written on numerous note cards. What he devised was a plan for storing information on computers; a technique he called Hypertext (Freiberger and Swaine, 2000: 207). While Nelson's hypertext referred to the interconnection of text-based information, it now includes links between multimedia forms of not only text, but still pictures, audio, real-time and delayed video that may be all connected together in a nonlinear manner. For Wilson, Hamzah, and Khattab (2003: 523), it is the use of hypertext that allows readers of online material truly "new interpretive possibilities" whereby audience members are able to creatively form meaning in a purposeful or "goal-directed" manner. Here, as with on-air content (television and radio), the audience member comes to understand the information presented based on their own cognitive interpretations, personal identity and varying social circumstances. Moreover, the immediacy of "first hand" information is seen as "empowering" (Wilson, Hamzah, & Khattab, 2003: 526).

ABC iView for its part is a new way to watch television. It is a free internet broadcasting service that currently lets audiences watch ABC programs on their computer. One of the problems is that it is aimed at the growing number of people with high speed internet connections (ADSL2, 1.1Mbps connection speeds), who want good quality pictures and content to watch on their computer or web-enabled TV. Therefore, audiences with slower internet connections will not get the best out of iView and those with no connection will miss out completely.

Where ABC2 offers repeats of ABC1 television programming in set schedules, ABC iView allows users (with requisite internet connections) to download programs on demand. This initiative is a result of audiences coming to expect programs to be available at their convenience and coupled with greater interactivity, flexible program schedules and choice. Moreover, iView and ABC Online more generally have become a means for users to enjoy entertainment, access news on-demand in real time (as many did during the recent US presidential election of Barack Obama) or to link to reliable educative content.

Another new addition to ABC Online is ABC Fora (see www.abc.net.au/tv/fora). This is the result of a new editorial partnership between the ABC and US web group Fora TV (www.fora.tv). The ABC's site ABC Fora includes a decent array of material sourced via a

⁷ Theodore Nelson coined the term 'hypertext' in 1965 in his paper A File Structure for the Complex, the Changing, and the Indeterminate, prepared for the Association for Computing Machinery's 20th National Conference, New York. Information about Theodore Nelson is available at URL: <http://ted.hyperland.com/bio.txt>.

range of useful but largely internal hyperlinks, the exception being to the US website www.fora.tv. The US based Fora TV itself provides internal hyperlinks alone that somewhat limit the complete ability for open-ended, non-sequential navigation to useful external websites which might greatly add value to users' online information seeking experiences.

The US based Fora TV is a non commercial website, however, it does have sponsors. The logos of sponsors featured at the bottom of the homepage do not, however, link to corporate webpages. In line with its public service mandate to educative programming, other partners listed on the ABC's ABC Fora site include [Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies \(AIATSIS\)](#); [Australian Parliament House](#); [Centre for Independent Studies](#); [La Trobe University](#); [Macquarie University](#); [National Archives of Australia](#); and [The Lowy Institute for International Policy](#) among others⁸. ABC Fora combines content sourced by the ABC from talks events all over Australia with the international material provided by the US based Fora TV. As a result it aims to deliver interesting speeches and debates from all over the world. According to the website it is a "new screen space for intellectual, political, cultural and economic debate in Australia".

ABC Fora broadcasts an eclectic and provocative selection of interesting, challenging and diverse talks events from such locations as major conferences to tiny inner-city bookshops, from libraries and town halls to universities and institutes across Australia. Such an initiative allows users access to a vast array of public intellectual activity from within their community as well as national and global events.

As a point of comparison to the ABC's current ventures, SBS.com.au offers audio and video downloads and podcast feeds for a select number its radio, television and online programs⁹. Options to send feedback online and participate in virtual forums centre on the content of on-air programs. An example is SBS's national current affairs program *Insight*, which advertises online that users can be a part of the television studio audience and take part in the debate that is being discussed at the time, or suggest a topic for later shows. If users want to take the debate further after the televised program, they have the option do so online (www.sbs.com.au/insight/about).

An examination of both ABC Online and sbs.com.au indicates that internal hyperlinking of the websites is dominant in preference to external, open-ended navigation. This makes for a

⁸ For a complete list of partners see: <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/fora/browse.htm>.

⁹ For a list of SBS Video downloads see: <http://www20.sbs.com.au/podcasting/index.php?action=browse&catid=10>: date accessed: 20 October 2008.

controlled experience of these sites by the organisations' designers. External links to material related to a homepage's content are available, however, these links largely go to external, secondary homepages themselves featuring internal navigation. In this manner, the user's experiences are limited to websites chosen for them and prevent inadvertent access to inappropriate sites. Cyber-users who follow an internal hyperlink to the homepage for Alchemy radio, the SBS's flagship national arts, music and talks program (www.sbs.com.au/alchemy) find recent programs available as podcasts. What is interesting is that in the last two years external links have been removed and the site is now dominated by internal links to the show's various programs and archives. Some years ago giving priority to audiences' niche interests via this site was actively sought by the SBS and examples included external links to the homepage of Inertia (www.inertia-music.com) which itself includes external links to international progressive record labels such as Compost Records (www.compost-records.com). This content is not widely available in the mainstream music market. There was an external link to Urban Agent (www.urbanagent.com.au) created for Australian DJs (Disc Jockeys) in the club scene who perform around Australia. Their website provides information on where and what they play. From the art realm, was an external link to TINA (This is Not Art) which outlined the group's ambitions to 'innovate, develop and display new types of art and media that have never been conceived of before' (www.thisisnotart.org). The more recent focus on internal links alone is, in my view, a shame because audience members were once themselves able to access the various sources for much of Alchemy's musical content via external websites that cater to audiences' niche interests rather than commercial industries and extending their depth of navigation. Like the ABC, the SBS seems keen to maintain its 'stickiness' where users are encouraged to remain within the site rather than navigating elsewhere.

External hyperlinks are, however, used effectively on other SBS webpages to extend the user's ability to access informative and educative content. From SBS's digital broadcasting information homepage (www.sbs.com.au/digital/), hyperlinks to related official, external websites are supplied. Such links go to Australian Government websites, for example, the Australian Broadcasting Authority (www.aba.gov.au); which incidentally could be updated to link to the ACMA website www.acma.gov.au) and the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (www.dcita.gov.au); and to all other Australian broadcasters' websites, including the commercial ones and transmission services providers such as Broadcast Australia. 'Other Australian Information Sources' are external links to selected papers written on topics including the challenges for broadcasting; there is the international digital television news website and links to international organisations including the Digital Television Group (Britain), the Federal Communications Commission in the US

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and the Multi-Home Platform forum in Germany (MHP is a transmission standard), among other sites. These are useful, additional resources that assist the navigation of interested audience members and extends the educative potential of the SBS site.

As a point of comparison to the digital broadcasting information available on SBS's website, from the ABC's website external links to additional information on the topic of digital technology are not as extensive. The ABC webpage does, however, usefully cluster information by topic in a left-hand side menu bar¹⁰. The ABC provides various, internally available homepages giving their perspective on digital television and datacasting and the associated technical benefits, without the capacity for the user to compare this information with that from other sources. External links to additional information on related websites are not provided should the user be interested in further investigation of the topic. No external links to departmental websites containing information on digital technology are evident. This might be in recognition of the need for ABC Online not to appear as the mouthpiece for government or other possibly unauthorised information, which maintains its independent status. SBS, however, was established with a key objective of providing information to Australia's new migrants that might assist them in their settlement. It is possible that for this reason, SBS provides departmental information online as it has via its traditional services. While much of the information found on the SBS website is in English, again, it is possible to access text and audio on demand in more than sixty languages (www.sbs.com.au/radio).

It must be noted that generally, less content is available via SBS.com.au than through ABC Online, probably for a very practical reason. Senior Lawyer at SBS, Sally McCausland, argues that the capacity to provide copyright clearance for much archived material is difficult for various reasons:

Often you are unable to contact people involved in a project; the people involved might not be interested; there might be multiple players to consult in order to gain clearance; and certainly the media is ephemeral – content might have been taped over or lost.

(Personal communication, 2009)

Certainly, there is the need to hasten the copyright clearance process to allow precious SBS archival material to be publicly accessed through SBS Online. Additional plans for the future

¹⁰ See: <http://search.abc.net.au/search/search.cgi?query=digital+television&sort=&collection=abcall&form=simple>; date accessed: 29 January 2009

include making all current SBS content available streamed or on-demand via SBS's online service.

Conclusion

This article has examined the ABC's website ABC Online and SBS's sbs.com.au to establish the ways that the Australian public broadcasters' are using their websites to respond to changes in the broadcasting industry and audience expectations of new media. This article noted that internet use has superceded television viewing in Australia for the first time. Rather than witnessing the complete fragmentation of television viewers (and radio listeners) there is evidence of continuity in the mass audience. Of significance, is the ability for audiences to now access their televisual/radio content, additional information linked to a program's site, or information from a stand-alone site via the public broadcasters' homepages. This allows users access to content on-demand at a time that suits them. More than this, it allows a depth of navigation through related, relevant and accurate information using internal and, in some cases, external hyperlinks that traditional television and radio cannot offer. In essence, this article has argued that the capacity to choose additional information from an array of externally linked sources from ABC Online or sbs.com.au, rather than being limited within a 'walled garden', ought to be encouraged further due to the dynamic nature of the internet and the possibilities it presents.

While ABC iView is simply a new way to watch television and one that not all audience members are able to access due to technological constraints, ABC Fora offers quite an array of interesting, challenging and diverse forums from many locations throughout Australia with links to US material. This site offers audiences a means for public discussion and debate as well as access to educative content.

This article confirms McQuail's (2005) theory that many users demand gatekeeping and editorial guidance when online. Moreover, users want the capacity to immediately acquire regularly updated information and/or services on demand twenty-four hours per day. This trend will arguably continue as the public service broadcasters' websites become the first choice, rather than the second, of local and global users. Through their respective online initiatives using various new media technologies, this article found that the internet has allowed Australia's public broadcasters, the ABC and SBS, new prospects to provide forums and spaces for education, entertainment, public discussion and interaction online.

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