

○ NEW AUDIENCE PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE ABC

Tony Walker, Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)

By embracing the affordances offered by broadband, new digital tools and increasingly open platforms, Australia's principal national public broadcaster – the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) – is positioning itself as a media organisation that not only creates high quality, relevant content, but one that also seeks partnerships with audiences, enabling them to create their own content and participate at the local, national and even global level to identify, and engage with issues that matter to them.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, discussions inside the ABC regarding strategic direction have, increasingly, been about the need to put audiences at the centre of the corporation's activities. This would seem to be an obvious operating principle for a public broadcaster; however, genuinely responsive relationships with audiences haven't always been natural or comfortable for public broadcasters. While their rhetoric has been around service to the community, it has often seemed that their Reithian heritage – a founding tradition of providing moral uplift and determining what is good for audiences – has imbued public broadcasters with a somewhat lofty character that has inhibited their capacity to extend their platforms in ways that invite and welcome interactivity. In a media environment that is increasingly defined by people's desire and ability to connect and participate this could become a fatal flaw.

Some inside the ABC worried that increased user participation – opening platforms to amateur, or user-generated, content – must inevitably compromise the standards and values that characterise the ABC's institutional standing in the community. The proliferation of new behaviours and new types of content on multiple new platforms not only fragmented audiences, but, by allowing audiences to 'invade' the space that had been traditionally occupied by media institutions and media professionals, many media professionals feared that their institutions and skills and expertise were being devalued (PEW 2008). If this were a corporate attitude, it could have become dangerously limiting for the corporation at a time when it needed to be developing strategies to thrive in an increasingly participatory media environment.

CONVERGENCE CULTURE

As Henry Jenkins puts it, the qualitative tendency of convergence culture is to integrate users and producers in the production of mediated experiences (Jenkins 2006). The result is new participatory relationships between audiences and their media. This tendency is profoundly recasting the relational patterns encompassing the production and consumption of content, and it affects the entire media space. Mark Deuze points out that as convergence culture takes place on both sides of the media spectrum – production and consumption – then the distinctions between the traditional role players in the production of cultural content are dissolving (Deuze 2007). At times, as in its submission (ABC 2008b) to the Government's National Broadcasting discussion paper at the end of 2008, the ABC's intense focus on the production side of the media spectrum – through its centrepiece multichannel proposals – seemed to suggest a limited appreciation of the scale of the change represented by convergence.

The opportunities and means for audiences to participate are growing. Up until just a few years ago, a call to a talkback radio program, or a letter to the editor, provided the most common path to audience participation in the media stream. Now, online guestbooks, fora for comment on online news stories and broadcast programs, recent developments such as the ABC's weekly Q&A TV current affairs panel show and the *Unleashed* online commentary space, all provide platforms for ABC users to express views and engage in debate with each other. However, such engagement takes place within highly structured frameworks, with users' capacity to connect across to each other being circumscribed. All these spaces are mediated and moderated in order to ensure that the content produced in them by users does not open the ABC to claims that it is breaching its own editorial guidelines or expose it to legal action.

The newer ABC online spaces do break down the strict limitations to participation inherent in the traditional broadcast media – the closed one-sender-to-many-receivers model – but they do not enable unbounded participation. Furthermore, there can be a tendency to look at participation as merely an opportunity to reinforce the relationship of the audience to the ABC, allowing it to come into an ABC space that is already defined for the user by format, or network, or subject matter, or by allowed behaviour, rather than as providing the means for users to decide how they want to participate and what they want to address.

This tension between the possibilities and the pitfalls inherent in the participation paradigm is exactly what Deuze means when he looks at the implications of convergence culture. The ABC has managed to successfully respond on the production side of the media paradigm shift, which sees users' relationship with content no longer confined to traditional one-to-many platforms of the analogue media era. It moved quickly to capitalise on the innovations of downloading and streaming, becoming a leading provider of podcasts and vodcasts. Its online iView television catch-up service is growing in popularity as audiences look for more ways to break away from the inconvenience of appointment viewing.

However, on the consumption side of the shift, where users look to participate, the ABC's moves towards providing platforms and tools for people to make and distribute their own content, and to connect with each other, were tentative. Those that did emerge, such as *Pool*, a creative media-sharing web project developed by Radio National in partnership with several universities and a growing community of contributors, operated in a tight funding environment straitened by the resource demands of the rapidly evolving multiplatform world. Local Radio encouraged the contribution of digital stories from its users, but its website functionality and capacity needed development.

EDITORIAL POLICIES FOR THE USER

A central question when considering these matters is that of whether it is possible to provide truly decentralised, participatory, audience-led platforms and at the same time control the quality of content produced on them to the extent that such content needs to conform to the ABC's editorial standards.

The ABC is understandably and properly concerned with protecting the value and integrity of its reputation and brand. For operators in the commercial sector, brand protection is generally about ensuring that nothing reflects on the broadcaster that affects or reduces its ability to aggregate audiences for advertisers. Up to a point, as long as it brings audiences and doesn't alienate

advertisers, even bad publicity can be regarded positively. However, as a public broadcaster the ABC has a different imperative. Its Charter outlines its mission 'to provide innovative and comprehensive broadcasting services of a high standard...that contribute to a sense of national identity and inform and entertain, and reflect the cultural diversity of, the Australian community' (ABC Act 1983). Underpinning this is a fundamental commitment to impartiality and accuracy (ABC 2007). It is the perceived threat to these basic principles of public broadcasting that can provoke a conservative – even reactionary – attitude to engagement with new participatory platforms and behaviours. This had to be overcome if the audience was to be allowed to participate in content creation and have a presence on ABC platforms.

The ABC's operating framework is set into law by way of its enabling Act (ABC Act 1983). Editorial standards are not optional. It has a statutory responsibility to construct and abide by a set of standards that are designed to preserve and protect the ABC's independence and ensure its impartiality. Making space on its platforms for the creative endeavours of its users results in something of an institutional dilemma for the ABC. The participatory affordances offered by open networks and digital production tools represent a risk to its standards and, if not properly managed, could be inimical to the trusted role the ABC plays as the national public broadcaster.

Furthermore, the participatory media framework can be a threat to traditional media institutions because it diminishes the gatekeeping function that gives these institutions, and the professionals who work in them, their special status in society. Axel Bruns has written about the replacement of gatekeeping with gatewatching, where the output gates of first-tier news organisations as well as primary sources are compared, observed and critiqued by practitioners such as bloggers or participatory journalism contributors (Bruns 2008).

This type of development presents a difficult challenge for public service broadcasters claiming a high purpose. Reluctance, and even resistance by professional content makers and their organisations to broad-scale sharing of the means of production and distribution is not difficult to understand, but if not overcome then it is possible that media institutions and media professionals could gradually lose their relevance to audiences as 'sense-making institutions' as the new networked information environment delivers what Yochai Benkler regards as 'a platform for better democratic participation...a medium to foster a more critical and self-reflective culture' (Benkler 2006). Therefore, it was a significant moment in March 2009 when the ABC Managing Director announced new guidelines delineating User-Generated Content (UGC) as a fifth content category to be incorporated into ABC Editorial Policies. The new category sits alongside News and Current Affairs, Opinion, Topical and Factual Content and Performance as a formal acknowledgement of the audience's role in content creation.

THE MAKING OF MEANING

The great offer of a public service media sector that is divorced from raw commercial considerations is that of enabling people to participate in the making of meaning. This has been a role the media has traditionally reserved for itself (Hartley 1996). But in a connected, digital age, this practice of sense-making is open to anybody in possession of the tools, access to the network, and the knowledge to use them. As John Hartley has put it, people could become the source, not the destination of mediated meanings (Hartley 2009). Or, as Flew et al stated it in their submission to the Government's 2008 ABC-SBS Discussion Paper:

'This is an ideal time for the ABC and SBS as public service media to embrace a change in emphasis, and become *participatory public service media* entities that embrace the multiplatform media environment, and harness and encourage the Australian people's appetite for participatory content creation.'

The incorporation of the UGC guidelines into its Editorial Policies formally marks the end of the ABC user experience as predominantly one-way. While most ABC users are older and more used to a passive relationship with the platforms, participatory behaviours are making their way into the mainstream. A recent survey by UK media regulator, Ofcom, found there has been a substantial rise in use of social networking platforms in the 25–54 year-old age bracket (Ofcom 2009). As Jenkins states, the biggest change in the user experience 'may be the shift from individualised and personalised media consumption toward consumption as a networked practice' (Jenkins 2006).

This means that while the ABC can be a part of the user's network of experience it is unlikely to be at its centre. At least, it cannot be at the centre of people's lives as a mere provider of media experiences. By contrast, providing digital tools and enhanced participatory platforms that enable people to develop the skills they need to have the fullest range of media experiences – to consume, connect, create, modify, collaborate, contribute, curate, recommend and distribute content on multiple platforms – would see the ABC retaining an elemental role in the lives of Australians. What they could gain from the ABC as learned digital literacy would not only enable their future media experiences, but also contribute to education and employment, and to participation in civic and political life in a connected, digital age.

BUILDING THE NATION'S VIRTUAL TOWN SQUARE

In his lobbying to secure improved funding and enhanced security for the national broadcaster, ABC Managing Director, Mark Scott, elevated the notion of the ABC as the nation's virtual town square into something of a rallying cry. The term became an expression of the role the ABC could play in the nation's day-to-day life; it was a cogent vision for a national public broadcaster that was engaged, like all media, in trying to draft an effective response to changes in the media environment arising from digitalisation, convergence and deep structural change in the economy and in society. Scott evinced a clear understanding of the challenges posed to media organisations by the new digitalised, networked information environment. He also saw, and said often, that, while the commercial media sector was facing formidable challenges, the times suited public broadcasters. He began publicly expressing both the need, and the intention, for the ABC to extend its public role beyond that of a producer and distributor of content to one that included the encouragement and facilitation of audience participation and civic engagement.

In the lead-up to the Rudd Government's Australia 2020 Summit, held in Parliament House in April 2008, a document titled *The ABC in the Digital Age – Towards 2020* was released by the ABC (ABC 2008a). The document was designed to feed into the summit zeitgeist, placing the corporation in the frame of the summiters' deliberations. It opened with a declaration that '...the ABC ensures that all Australians can participate in the national debate ...' and that, in doing this, the ABC will become Australia's leading public space – a 'town square'. This vision gained some purchase in the Summit, with the report of the Governance stream noting the de-

sirability of the ABC as a facilitator of 'electronic town meetings' (Australian Government 2008a). In addressing the role of Australia's public broadcasters, the Final Report of the Australia 2020 Summit reflected on the changes wrought on broadcasting by digital technology and noted that a new broadcasting charter for Australia's public broadcasters (including the Special Broadcasting Service), would need to reflect the roles and responsibilities in the digital media era and all future platforms (Australian Government 2008b).

In October 2008, six months after the Australia 2020 Summit, the Federal Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, Senator Stephen Conroy, released a discussion paper published by his department entitled *ABC and SBS: Towards a digital future* (DBCDE 2008). The discussion paper sought to 'extend' proceedings at the Australia 2020 Summit into a conversation for the wider Australian community. It posed a number of questions about specific aspects of the role, functions and objectives of national broadcasting in the lead-up to 2020.

In his foreword to the discussion paper, Minister Conroy picked up Mark Scott's cue; he noted that the ABC and SBS had provided Australians with a 'virtual village square'. Further on, the discussion paper pointed to the Australian Government's intention to roll out a high-speed National Broadband Network (NBN) and noted the ABC's 'desire to expand (its) online platforms to create a 'town square' for community participation... in relation to local communities'. After 'encouraging all Australians with an interest in our national broadcasters... to submit their thoughts and perspectives' to the review, and explaining that review outcomes would be considered in the triennium funding round for each broadcaster, the minister concluded that

'The phenomenon of convergence and digitisation of the media is changing and challenging all media platforms. We must ensure that Australia's national broadcasters can and will meet these challenges and continue to play a valued role in Australian broadcasting.'

Thus, the ABC set about reinforcing its case for funding based on a vision of itself as the 'host of the national conversation'. In its submission in response to the Discussion Paper, the ABC noted that broadband internet was already transforming communications and media delivery, citing its IP television catch-up service, iView, and its live radio streaming and phenomenal podcast success. The submission reinforced a central initiative in its 2009–2012 triennial funding bid, which would see the ABC extending its 'existing regional hubs to allow ABC Local to become the catalyst and host for locally-generated broadband activity in regional communities'. This element of its budget submission went right to the heart of the ABC's pitch to 'host the national conversation' and to be innovative.

Furthermore, as an initiative that would 'help bring broadband to life for all Australians' it complemented the Government's own strategies as it prepared to launch its plan to roll out a high-speed fibre-based national broadband network. On April 8, 2009, a day after the Rudd Labor Government announced details of its intention to finance and build the NBN, Mark Scott was in Melbourne delivering an address to university students. In his preliminary remarks he described the government's NBN plan as 'remarkable' and observed that it was set to 'reshape the future.' At the same time he reiterated his call for increased funding to enable the ABC to

provide a 'virtual town square – where Australians can come to listen and learn from each other' (Scott 2009).

FUNDING THE BROADBAND HUBS

On May 12 – Budget Night 2009 – Minister Conroy announced additional funding for the national broadcasters, totalling \$185.3 million over three years, allowing them 'to expand their range of programming and build on the success of existing initiatives' (Conroy 2009). The ABC received \$151.7 million in new funding over the next triennium, including \$15.3 million to deliver 'enhanced Regional Broadband Hubs' (Budget 2009). The Minister said the funds were to enable the ABC 'to assist regional communities to create local broadband material to complement the roll-out of the National Broadband Network.' The next morning, *The Canberra Times* reported that, following the budget announcement, the ABC's Managing Director was able to say that the broadband hubs would enable the ABC to fulfil its Charter as Australia's town square (Massola 2009).

At the time of writing, the shape and scope of the broadband hubs project was being determined. It is likely that the funds will be used to enhance the broadband content production capability of the ABC's 50 regional radio stations, enabling them to evolve into regional multimedia centres. The Acting Head of ABC Radio Multiplatform and Content Development, Linda Bracken, who is managing the project, sees the ABC 'creating compelling multimedia content with our regional audiences and for our regional audiences.' She says the ABC will be 'opening the front door of local online websites for people to upload and contribute content with any topic that people have engaged with on the radio being replicated online' (Bracken 2009).

This vision is in accord with Mark Scott's testimony to Senate hearings held a couple of weeks after the budget announcement, when he committed the ABC to 'establishing community websites and genre portals which would allow Australians with common interests to talk with each other and to share experiences.' He went on:

'... this is the creation of a virtual town square, a place where Australians can come together to listen to each other, to learn from each other, to speak and to be heard. In practice, we will be using ABC local as the hubs for this with the existing websites. We will be creating more broadband content. We will be equipping the community to create and deliver more broadband content. We will be the distributor and promoter of that wherever possible. We are going to match the expansion of these hubs with the rollout of the National Broadband Network.'

THE ABC IN 2012

What could we imagine for the ABC as a modernising, evolving public broadcaster by the end of the new funding triennium in 2012? If it were to embrace the opportunities offered by participation and social networks it is likely to have continued its transformation from a top-down, one-to-many broadcaster, into a dynamic multiplatform public media organisation focusing on providing opportunities for people to create, contribute and share their content and share their experiences with each other. While the broadcast model continues to play a significant part in

people's cultural lives and attract large, but significantly older, audiences, digitally networked media have produced increasingly interactive audience behaviours to the point where they are now a normal characteristic of mainstream broadcasting.

As opportunities to participate become available, audiences have taken them up. Social networking has continued to develop as the backbone of people's media experience, particularly as the media habits of the 'millennials' – born in the 1980s and 90s into the beginnings of the network society and what Manuel Castells refers to as the rise of mass self-communication (Castells 2009) – have moved into the mainstream. Where the digital tools and networks are accessible, connecting and participating have become the normal characteristics of people's behaviour. Audiences in the traditional sense of a mass, passive following barely exist. Users of ABC services are active participants, choosing to make connections *across* to each other instead of – or, at least, as well as – receiving content produced and distributed in a top-down, one-to-many traditional media model.

The ABC will have spent wisely the 15 million dollars given to it in the 2009 budget for developing its offer to regional Australians. It has leveraged participatory media technologies to allow people from a variety of perspectives to engage and collaborate, to share stories, to create relevant content, to ask questions and provide answers. And it has taken the lessons it learned in developing appropriate digital tools for participation, and building new audience relationships through the development of the broadband hubs, and is extending to everyone, across all its platforms, the opportunity to participate, becoming a key contributor to the development of digital literacy in the community.

Global economic and environmental uncertainties have continued to grow, and a new urgency has attached to the development of media services that are reliable and capable of shedding light on the ever-gathering complexities of society, of telling stories and entertaining people. As the commercial media sector has continued to struggle financially and withdraw from the public sphere behind expensive pay-walls, the importance, and appreciation, of the ABC's offer of relevant and distinctive content and services on all its platforms has grown. It is now one of the few consistent open spaces where topics of importance and relevance are identified, investigated and debated, and where audiences can engage around high-quality content of all kinds, use tools to produce their own content, and collaborate with others in a safe and trusted media environment.

REFERENCES

- Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2008. The ABC in the Digital Age – Towards 2020, ABC Media Release, 17 April, sighted 29 May 2008, online at <http://www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs/media/s2219354.htm>.
- Australian Broadcasting Corporation, March 2007. 'Code of Practice', News and Current Affairs, online at <http://www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs/documents/codeprac07.pdf>.
- Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2008. Submission to Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy Discussion Paper 'ABC and SBS: Towards a digital future', December, sighted 11 March 2009, online at http://www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs/documents/public_broadcasting_review.pdf.
- Australian Government, Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983 – Section 6, Charter Of The Corporation, online at <http://www.comlaw.gov.au/ComLaw/Legislation/ActCompilation1.nsf/all/search/2E7F5179D6598E8DCA2574730019A00B>.

- Australian Government, Budget Measures 2009–10. Budget Paper No. 2 – Part 2: Expense Measures – Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, 'Rural and Regional National Broadband Initiative – ABC regional broadband hubs', sighted 30 May, online at http://www.budget.gov.au/2009-10/content/pb2/html/bp2_expense-07.htm, p.12.
- Australian Government, 2008. 'The Future of Australian Governance', Australia 2020 Summit – Final Report, sighted on 16 June, 2008, online at http://www.australia2020.gov.au/docs/final_report/2020_summit_report_9_governance.pdf.
- Australian Government, 2008. 'Towards a creative Australia', Australia 2020 Summit – Final Report, sighted on 16 June, 2008, http://www.australia2020.gov.au/docs/final_report/2020_summit_report_8_creative.pdf.
- Benkler, Y. 2006. *The Wealth of Networks*, Yale University Press: How social production transforms markets and freedom, New Haven, p. 2.
- Bracken, L. 2009, interview with the author conducted on 6 August.
- Bruns, A. 2008. 'Gatewatching, Gatecrashing: Futures for Tactical News Media', in *Digital Media and Democracy: Tactics in Hard Times*, ed. M. Boler, MIT Press, Cambridge.
- Castells, M. 2009. *Communication Power*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 4.
- Conroy, Senator Stephen. 2009. 'Budget 2009: Broadcasters and broadband to invigorate and strengthen Australia's digital economy', Ministerial media release, 12 May, sighted 13 May 2009, online at http://www.minister.dbcde.gov.au/media/media_releases/2009/034.
- Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, 2008. ABC and SBS: Towards a digital future, sighted 20 November, online at http://www.dbcde.gov.au/media_broadcasting/consultation_and_submissions/abc_sbs_review/discussion_paper.
- Deuze, M. 2007. *Media Work*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Hartley, J. 1996. *Popular Reality: Journalism, Modernity, Popular Culture*, Arnold, London.
- Hartley, J. 2009. *The uses of digital literacy*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, p. 48.
- Jenkins, H. 2006. *Convergence Culture: Where old and new media collide*, New York University Press, New York.
- Massola, J. 2009. 'All a Twitter over funding', *The Canberra Times*, 18 May, p.10.
- Ofcom, 2009. 'Converging Markets', *The Communications Market 2008*, August, online at http://www.ofcom.org.uk/research/cm/cmr09/CMRMain_5.pdf, p. 288.
- Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2008. 'Financial Woes Overshadow All Other Concerns For Journalists', Pew Research Centre Publications, 17 March, sighted 17 June, online at <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/766/journalists-financial-woes>.
- Scott, M. 2009. La Trobe University Annual Media and Cinema Studies Lecture, April 8, sighted 9 April 2009, online at <http://abc.net.au/corp/pubs/media/s2538867.htm>.

Cite this article as: Tony Walker. 2009. 'New audience partnerships for the ABC'. *Telecommunications Journal of Australia*. 59 (3): pp. 43.1 to 43.8. DOI: 10.2104/tja09043.