

**Universal Access to the National Broadcaster – address by
Professor Alan Knight to Friends of the ABC National
Conference in Melbourne, May 2007**

Like many of you, I am old enough to remember when mainstream media pretty much had a monopoly on mass communications.

Not any more.

Indeed mainstream media, such as the ABC will need to re-invent themselves to avoid being marginalised in an interactive globalised world information order.

Today, I would like to talk about some of these new communications technologies from the perspective of a media user and producer with a concern for the future of Australian media.

When I was in Cambodia fifteen years ago, Khmer Rouge radio still up in the hills, broadcasting denunciations about running dogs. But nobody in the capital Phnom Penh seemed to be listening. People had erected satellite dishes on their rooftops, linked with a spider web of cables and were watching Hong Kong made sitcoms and quiz shows.

Four years later in 1997, the British hoped to use global TV to obscure the fact they delivered an educated and democratic population to one of the most authoritarian and corrupt regimes on earth. The British tried to distract the international audience by creating the Hong Kong handover as a spectacle crafted for live, global television. There were fireworks, marching Scotsmen, and even the Prince of Wales delivered on schedule to carefully sited television cameras.

But even ten years ago, people were already using the internet to bypass satellite television to report, analyse, distribute and discuss. I established my own website, Dateline Hong Kong, to progressively record the views of correspondents covering the event, make the material available to journalism educators across the globe, and to create a safe repository for the information so that it might be later published as a book. The book, Reporting Hong Kong, was researched in China, written in Tokyo and Yeppoon in Central Queensland, copy edited in Sydney, published in New York and London and sold globally on Amazon.com.

Today websites like Reporting Hong Kong are called blogs. According to Technorati, which monitors the net, by last month there were about seventy million blogs on the World Wide Web. That figure is already out of date. Tehnorati claimed that one point four new blogs were being created every second.

In mainland China, dissident journalists are turning to blogs to discuss stories suppressed in the still tightly controlled mainstream press. The religious group Falun Gong, has been funding IT research in the United States to penetrate the Chinese firewalls and allow information to flood in from outside.

Short wave broadcasts are already an anachronism. Last year, we were living at Hong Kong University and found that the mountains defeated the FM transmitted programs of Radio Television Hong Kong. However, the university had campus wide wireless -- remote connected broadband. So I tuned my computer into BBC online programs, connected a small amplifier and speakers to the earphone outlet and was able to enjoy news and music.

So what does these developments mean for mainstream media?

News Corporation's 77 year old Rupert Murdoch said that he grew up in " a highly centralised world where news and information were tightly controlled by a few editors, who deemed to tell us what we could and should know". Those days were gone forever. Murdoch called his young daughters, digital natives, who would "never know a world without ubiquitous broadband internet access".

Two years ago, Murdoch told the American Society of Newspaper Editors that 44% of news consumers aged between 18 and 34 used the internet once a day for news, compared to 19% who used newspapers. 39% expected to use the internet more, compared to eight percent who expected to use newspapers more. He said mainstream media had to adapt or become "also rans".

Murdoch responded by converging his music, movie, sports and news business to attract younger consumers to websites. He created Fox News, a cross promotion of entertainment, celebrities, self serving politics, and theatrical hectoring; tricked out in a news format.

In Murdoch's view it seemed while the digital natives were definitely restless, they still might be rounded up for a profit!

ABC

So what about the alternatives offered by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation?

The ABC restructured in February to place its online convergence at the centre of its operations.

The ABC, Australia's most complex media organisation, launched its national radio network in 1932. Its organisation reflected the telephone network, which carried its information; centred in Sydney and radiating out to state capitals and eventually regional centres.

While the ABC's executive offices remain at the old analogue hub in Sydney, its News production has been dispersed to the ABC's 64 newsrooms around Australia and converged on the online newsroom near my office on the QUT campus.

The Restructuring measures included :

- The creation of a new Innovation Division as an incubator for digital development across the ABC, and reporting directly to the Managing Director;
- The integration of the ABC News Online unit with the news and current affairs team into a rebadged ABC News Division to further develop a content rich news site;
- Integrating ABC TV and ABC2 in the Television Division to improve the synergies between the two channels and creating a structure that can sustain additional digital television channels in the years ahead;
- The Radio Division to become the Radio and Regional Content Division, accelerating the process of turning each of the ABC's 60 local radio stations across Australia into hubs for digital content generation – providing both audio and video content for radio broadcasts, local ABC websites and television programming;
- Combining international operations into one division to promote and grow audiences for Australia Network and Radio Australia.

The ABC re-organisation recognised that radio, television and text were no longer separate products, couched in discrete production cultures. Rather these ABC

divisions were content producers serving digital delivery systems, which might include radio, television and websites. It was a belated admission that multi media production was a core practice rather than an experiment.

"It is not an add-on, it is not a novelty, it is the present reality as well as the future," Mr. Scott said.

Discussion

So what of the future?

Private media's financial base, which underpins quality newspaper derived journalism will continue to shift ground towards the internet. The advertising revenue which supports quality newspapers may be diminished, undermining the journalism which supports newspaper websites. Some industry commentators claim that revenues will cross over within two decades. This process has already begun, as corporations investing in newspapers cut costs or slim their publications

Commercial Network free to air television revenues can also be expected to reduced as broadband expands and portals such as Joost offer high quality digital video downloads. Why wait for the local free to air station to broadcast the latest US sitcom, crime drama or reality show, when the material can be accessed at source?

Journalists' influence and credibility will be increasingly challenged by Individual websites, such as blogs, which may offer previously unrepresented opinion, but which also already attract much larger audiences than some conventional columnists. The old style exclusive, international news order is already dead, even in mainland China where the government strenuously and unsuccessfully attempts to enforce official accounts of international events. It has been

effectively replaced by blended and multi sourced information, which collectively contributes to the new global media environment. The Internet allows the creation of multi-layered reports, which are embedded with images, video, and animation.

Accuracy will become a key issue as diligent consumers compare journalists' analysis with their sources original words. Authenticated websites which aggregate these reports, such as the BBC, and the ABC (Australia) can be expected to record rapidly rising page views.

As a result, public funded broadcasters may have a new lease on life, if they are able to adapt. High content programs which may have a low audience on radio or television can accumulate huge global audiences via the net. In 2006, ABC Online reached an average of 2.02million people per month from within Australia, and ABC Online's audience reach increased by 20 per cent from 2005 to 2006, nearly three times the rate of growth in internet uptake (7 per cent). (Cook 2007)

It may be that governments will re-consider the worth of such broadcasters delivering information and therefore influence to wider audiences. This in turn may mitigate politicians past claims of public sector broadcasting elitism.

Specifically what are the challenges for the ABC?

The internet will make Corporate Terrestrial transmitters and even satellite distribution increasingly irrelevant.

Programs will be available on demand, transmitted by internet, distributed by broadband, received by computer chip, and re-broadcast by individual transmitters within dwellings.

This means that if I want to listen to Phillip Adams, I can request the program at a time when it suits me, rebroadcast it on my house transmitter so that I can listen to Phil on my transistor radio as I do the gardening. Television will operate in a similar way and will be receivable on my mobile phone.

These technologies are already available in a limited form from ABC.net.au and JTV. As broadband speeds improve and hardware becomes cheaper and more accessible, they will become universal.

Meanwhile, the audience will be able to fact check. interact. If ABC staff remain remote, their credibility will be undermined in blogs, MSN or even Skype video discussions.

ABC shop revenues will be affected as consumers download music and videos from websites. Music stores are already closing around Australia as consumers buy their music directly from Apple's online iTunes store. To survive ABC shops will have to offer specialised consumer support and information.

ABC managers may be tempted to see these technological developments as revenue raisers by;

- restricting archive material
- imposing a fees for download
- creating password access

Mark Scott is right that digital work has moved from the margins to the centre of ABC operations. It follows that terrestrial broadcasts, while they can be expected to continue in the foreseeable future, will become less important in communicating with younger, computer savvy audiences. It also follows that

moves to charge fees for downloadable services would increasingly undermine the ABC as a public owned source of information, education and entertainment.

We would be effectively privatising the ABC's future.