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This is the published version:

Cinque, Toija 2007, ABC online : a vortal for new opportunities?, *Australian journal of communication*, vol. 34, no. 3, pp. 85-100.

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ABC Online

A vortal for new opportunities?

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ABSTRACT: *This article undertakes an analysis of the ABC's website, ABC Online—www.abc.net.au—to explore how the public broadcaster uses the Internet to offer new services. While recognising that the ABC aims to enhance its traditional radio and television services using the Internet, the article establishes the extent to which ABC Online also provides innovative, original, and interactive new services, including those with no connection to traditional radio and television programs, as is often demanded by audiences. This article examines the capacity for ABC Online to develop a unique and distinctive role via the Internet through the potential to offer novel and interactive content and services.*

The contemporary broadcasting industry is characterised by technological and social change, it is increasingly competitive, and the media industry is fragmenting. Such changes are giving Australians an increased choice of media in different formats and on different platforms. As content—be it text, sound, or vision—is made available from multiple sources, it is apparent that audiences will continue to splinter (Cooke, 2006, p. 210; Given, 2003, p. 201). Changes to employment patterns and lifestyles are dramatically affecting when and to what audiences choose to watch and listen. This will have a significant impact on what is currently considered by broadcasters to be 'prime-time'. As audiences come to expect programs to be available at their convenience and coupled with greater interactivity, flexible

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program schedules and choice become more important to them (Rose, 2003). As a consequence, the ABC, as program producer and deliverer, has 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.

This article undertakes an analysis of the ABC's website, ABC Online—www.abc.net.au—to explore how the public broadcaster uses the Internet to offer new services¹. According to the ABC's Corporate Plan for 2004–2007 (2004, p. 20), this is to be achieved by not only extending broadband content and enhancements to meet increased audience demand for interactive media content, but also extending the relevance of ABC Radio and Television programs². That is, the ABC aims to continue the appeal of its traditional media while simultaneously creating and delivering new content and services over wireless and mobile platforms. While recognising that the broadcaster aims to enhance its traditional radio and television services using the Internet, the article will establish the extent to which ABC Online also provides innovative, original, and interactive new services, including those with no connection to traditional radio and television programs, as is often demanded by audiences.

It is not the intention of this article to take the traditional media landscape and simply transpose it to the new media age. It is clear that ABC Online does not operate in an environment of scarcity, where there are a handful of players, which is the case for traditional radio and television broadcasting, an environment in which public broadcasting is unique and distinctive. This article examines the capacity for ABC Online to develop a unique and distinctive role via the Internet, through the potential to offer novel and interactive content and services.

The ABC's online and on-air activities

ABC Online encourages its audiences (which are not necessarily mutually exclusive) 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 platforms³. This 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, p. 231):

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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.

For Wilson, Hamzah, and Khattab (2003, p. 523), it is the use of hypertext⁴ 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, p. 526).

What is fundamental to the present article's investigation is that the term 'hypertext' involves hyperlinking (from one text/media chunk to another), using both internal and external hyperlinks (or links for short). Internal links take the individual to hypertext within a particular website. External links, by contrast, take the individual outside the first-accessed website to other websites, often containing more external (and internal) links. This type of external hyperlinking provides open-ended, non-sequential navigation and is arguably a valuable inclusion on a site.

ABC Online: The navigational advantage provided by hyperlinking

While 'Section 9: Links and Interactivity' of the ABC's Editorial Policies document⁵ (2007, p. 50) allows online staff to include hyperlinks to non-ABC sites, an examination of ABC Online indicates that internal hyperlinking of the website is dominant in preference to external, open-ended navigation. This makes for a controlled experience of ABC Online by the organisation's 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.

The ABC Television homepage was examined, and, as expected, internal links to ABC-produced/commissioned programs are included on the

television homepage. Individual program homepages, such as that for *Difference of Opinion*, a topical debate program, provide internal links alone to transcripts of recent programs and a message page. They also offer users the ability to answer 'Yes' or 'No' to a newsworthy question (www.abc.net.au/tv/differenceofopinion/). David Peters, the series producer of *Difference of Opinion*, believes that external hyperlinks could be useful on the site's homepage, but that including them was not something he had considered:

People that go to the site [for Difference of Opinion] and add their comments about the program, continue the debate on-line and possibly seek out a transcript of a program, are usually pretty informed about the topic. But certainly if they weren't fully up to scratch on an aspect of the topic, such as Australia's Anti-Terror Laws that we covered on 28 August this year, then it could be useful to have a link to find the appropriate legislation or to see what other organisations had written on the subject, rather than having to 'google' for the information. I see our site as providing information about our particular programs and panelists, and giving viewers an opportunity to keep the debate going on-line with other interested viewers, rather than necessarily providing a service for extra research. However, I can see merit in the concept of hyperlinks, though we if did put external links up, we would have to be mindful of providing a balance so that no particular government party or organisation appeared to be favoured or promoted.

With regard to ABC Television and ABC Radio content that appears on ABC Online, ABC news journalist Caroline Keenan also argues that, while background information and other resources related to a story might be useful, it is often not possible to provide such knowledge, largely due to the time that this additional research would take. As she states:

I see my primary role as providing the latest information on a particular event or topic ... And while I have to put the story in context, it is not my job to point the audience in any other direction because my story should be self-contained. For example, if I was reporting on a footballer's appearance in court I wouldn't also provide research [to be loaded onto the ABC website] on his background, the club he plays for, the history of the game, et cetera. Moreover, there isn't the time, or indeed the resources, to compile this extra material.

A limited number of external links are provided on the separate 'program websites' page which go to foreign (official) sites hosting information

on the programs aired on the ABC. Examples include *The Bill* (drama), *Absolutely Fabulous* (comedy), and *Bob the Builder* (children). These external links, however, all connect to external websites that employ the same methods as the ABC of limiting external navigation from its site. Overall, opportunities are few for wide-ranging online navigation from ABC Television via the external hyperlinks provided (www.abc.net.au/tv/programs/). As such, there is limited means for excursion away from ABC Online via the ABC Television homepage, based upon the ABC's non-commercial imperatives, and because external websites might not be secure or offer content not endorsed by the public broadcaster, or they are just not considered necessary to the goals of a program's site.

The homepages created for ABC Radio (www.abc.net.au/radio/), including Classic FM and ABC Radio National, provide their services via internal links. These homepages allow the user to listen to various radio programs on demand. This includes the provision of archived ABC stories and information. Where it is appropriate, however, external links to secondary sites containing information that is related to material on ABC homepages are being included in some instances. For example, the radio program 'dig' (the ABC's digital radio) provides access to a secondary site that contains information about 'podcasting' (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/podcast>). The youth-oriented radio program Triple J allows external navigation to the official websites of featured artists. For example, from the Triple J homepage, the user can choose the hyperlink 'free music mp3s' that leads to the Triple J free music homepage. Various featured artists are listed with their pictures, music for download, tour dates as well as access to their own websites (for example, [chkchkchk](http://chkchkchk.net/index.html#home) at <http://chkchkchk.net/index.html#home> or Mister Speed at <http://www.myspace.com/mrbenjaminspeed>).

A distinct virtual community has emerged through the network of internally linked ABC Online homepages addressing rural and regional issues. While much of the content stems from the ABC's rural television and radio services, additional features are included (www.abc.net.au/rural/ and www.abc.net.au/backyard/). Various services have been created such as Stay in Touch, where one can join a rural mailing list; another homepage gives regional youth 'a voice'; other features include a rural events diary, video, audio, and still-image highlights of these rural events, as well as the capacity for net-navigators to have their own images uploaded onto the site (www.abc.net.au/rural/upload.htm). The ABC Rural homepage includes a number of external links related to rural and primary industry issues. The Backyard regional

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homepage affords a version of cyber-travel by means of a web-camera that shows the skylines of various Australian cities and towns in real time (www.abc.net.au/backyard/diary.htm). More functional, however, is information on weather patterns, particularly fire and storm warnings, that can be accessed immediately and on demand. In essence, it is with regional matters that the ABC is particularly strong for web-based content delivery. Because regional Australians are so spread out—the nearest neighbour might be hundreds of kilometres away—the ABC maintains the need to create a community online as a core public broadcasting principle of promoting a sense of nationhood, which was first developed through traditional radio and then television. This might be the creation of a real community online, or the perception of being joined to the rest of Australia, although physically separated by distance. As a priority, ABC Online provides ways for ‘Australians to connect with one another’ (ABC, 2004, p. 4).

The most diverse externally linked resources are contained on the ABC’s Health & Wellbeing homepage, an updated version of the ABC’s Health Matters site (www.abc.net.au/health/). Under the Health Matters banner until early 2007, this site was an online-only health-related information webpage via ABC Online. Here, users could access more in-depth information from select medical journals, the Private Health Insurance Ombudsman, or the Health Insurance Commission. No advertising by organisations in the health field was present on this homepage, in order not to conflict with the imperative that the ABC remain free from commercial influences. These features remain under the Health & Wellbeing title, but the site now offers content from health-related ABC Television and ABC Radio programs as well.

Dominant on-air programs, simply repeated online as modified versions of themselves, are conceding space to additional information/features online. This is due to websites becoming the first choice, rather than the second, for media information, entertainment, and other services. Online additions may be stand-alone or in conjunction with on-air material. A study conducted by Wilson, Hamzah, and Khattab (2003, p. 526) found that ‘[r]eading a web page, escaping the habit of hardcopy, we [cyber-users] enjoy “instant news”’. From Wilson’s study, it can be argued that ‘escaping’ traditional media’s broadcasting schedules in favour of on-demand information/services is important to many cyber-users.

An examination of ABC Online found homepages that exist as online content alone and not as repeats of their on-air parent program.

Examples of this include the ABC's Science Online (www.abc.net.au/science/) and the Health & Wellbeing homepage (www.abc.net.au/health/). While these homepages might contain internal links to related on-air programming, there are examples of stand-alone, online-only hypertext. 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 (available as a part of the New Media Showcase) about William Bligh (<http://www.abc.net.au/bligh/>). These stand-alone examples via ABC Online are principally 'walled gardens' largely comprising internal hyperlinks, however, and this is a deliberate strategy according to Daryl Dellora, the Director of Film Art Doco Pty Ltd, the creators of William Bligh:

We had quite detailed discussions with the ABC prior to commencing the project. The ABC had specific requirements on the use of hyperlinks that could be included. This had to do with not linking to inappropriate material or commercial content on external sites for example. Any sites that were proposed by us for inclusion on the Bligh site had to be approved by the ABC first. This certainly didn't stop us from having some 'live' links. For example, we were working with the State Library of New South Wales and included an external link [to www.sl.nsw.gov.au] within the William Bligh site. We did find, however, that there was a general bias within the ABC for not including external links because they didn't want users to go away from ABC Online. They didn't want to lose audience members to other sites.

This view is not shared by David Peters, however, who is positive about how the prospect of external hyperlinks on the *Difference of Opinion* site would be received within the ABC:

The ABC is very pro-active in relation to new media content, and I believe would be much more likely to be favourable to using external hyperlinks than the commercial broadcasters, who are fundamentally about generating publicity for their programs and celebrities, as well as opportunities to generate on-line advertising revenue. At the ABC, external hyperlinks could be seen as a good way of keeping people informed, and exposing them to a wide variety of views and information. I don't think the ABC would be worried about hyperlink users leaving ABC Online, they'd be more likely to follow an external link and then return to the ABC site. I think it would be viewed as an add-on attraction, an added benefit and service to visitors to our sites.

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As outlined above, the individuals responsible for producing ABC programs or creating new media content also provide the material that goes online. It would seem, therefore, that whether external hyperlinks are included or not is discretionary and depends on the level of contribution they are seen as making to a site. Ultimately, however, 'the inclusion, placement and commentary for all links to external websites will be at the discretion of the ABC' (ABC, 2007, p. 50)⁶.

Citizens in cyberspace: Current affairs, news, and public participation

A (post)modern form of citizenry includes cyber-participants interacting online through forums for discussion and debate, sending comments and feedback via e-mail, requesting and accessing information, downloading data, voting, and taking quizzes (Mitra & Watts, 2002). The array of features from ABC Online allows these citizens the capacity to undertake a range of participatory activities. This development allows ABC Online innovative ways to promote an informed citizenry through access to educational and informational services as well as diversity in content via means other than broadcasting. The promotion of an informed citizenry by the ABC is arguably imperative in a new media environment for three key reasons: (1) an informed and educated citizenry is best served by the new technology providing accurate and independent information that the public broadcaster can offer; (2) new technologies are increasingly seen as an essential part of democratic practice and education; and (3) the goal of promoting an informed citizenry is not met elsewhere in commercial oligopolies⁷.

An examination of ABC Online confirms Siapera's (2004, p. 164) argument that there are three different ways audiences are addressed as citizens simultaneously. The first refers to audiences as informed citizens who require and are provided with up-to-date news. The second encourages the activity of a 'public-sphere oriented or deliberative citizen' who wants to be involved in debate and discussion with others. The third is a more 'popular' citizenry involving plebiscites and referenda, whereby participation is exercised through voting directly online.

The majority of participatory options fixed within ABC Online homepages analysed for this article were connected to on-air programs. For ABC Online, the provision of news in both delayed and real time was common across such topics as sport, music, politics, and science. The capacity to 'have a say' was often featured. Examples include the ABC's Backyard's community story telling (www.abc.net.au/backyard/),

and the Politics homepage where the user is encouraged to 'have a say about issues' such as the 2007 New South Wales (NSW) election campaign and the security of Australia's water future (www.abc.net.au/news/politics/).

There is a particular feature on the ABC's online science forum The Lab, not featured on other forum sites. It defines those participating in the forum in the following way (www.abc.net.au/science/k2/stn/main.shtm):

® Registered members—these are people who have registered their name or identity with ABC Online. They have an ® symbol after their name or identity.

Guests—are welcome to use our forums, but note that your contributions may not appear immediately.

The Lab (name appears in red)—these people work for the ABC, and keep the forums running.

While registering online might protect an individual's identity from being impersonated, it might also signify that ABC Online oversees the movements of users while online. That is, users might be 'tracked' as to what homepages they go to and what contributions they make via forums. However, a pseudonym or 'handle' can be used to avoid directly identifying any individual, thus enabling them to remain anonymous. An explanation to the forum community of vested interests (declaring when a participant is an ABC employee, for example) similar to the above, would maintain the integrity of a site and might be a useful inclusion on other online forums as well.

Online forums might provide new means for public participation on various topics (Ranganathan, 2003). The idea that the media could provide new opportunities for public debate on a wide range of political, social, and moral issues was proposed by Livingstone and Lunt (1994) in relation to television 'talk shows', for example, issue discussion programs such as *Oprah*. These authors argue that talk shows do not follow the 'fairly predictable framework of mutual expectations' or the genre conventions that adhere to beginning, middle, and [usually happy] ending structures (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994, p. 6). Therefore, as the talk show topic often goes off track, an ending is never certain and audience expectations are challenged. As Livingstone and Lunt (1994) outline:

[T]he definition of a successful conclusion cannot be specified in advance, for different participating publics may draw different

conclusions from a debate: emergent conclusions may be plural and not necessarily consensual. (p. 33)

Livingstone and Lunt's (1994) discussion of broadcast forums raises an interesting question as to whether their conclusions can also be applied to the role of the public broadcaster's forums online. In this context, online forums promoting further discussion of opinions after a program, or even away from matters raised on-air, arguably extends the potential for public participation. Like discussion programs on television, online forums can be seen as attempting to:

provide an organised representation of the rational consensus, as corrupting the life-world through institutional power, or as giving a voice to diverse subject positions and allowing negotiation of meanings and compromise. [But] the recent emphasis on participatory programming repositions the media and constructs a different relationship between established power [broadcasters, program hosts and expert guests] and the laity [general audience members]. (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994, p. 95)

This idea that ABC Online's use of the Internet could provide new opportunities for public debate online is supported by the work of Siapera (2004, p. 165), who confirms the 'extended possibilities for political participation' through the Internet. Through online forums, public process and debate are encouraged. It is possible that dedicated homepages connected to ABC Online that analyse Commonwealth and State parliamentary sessions, significant committee hearings, or inquiries could extend these activities further. This section has argued that the ABC's online forums escape genre formats and rigid time schedules of the on-air media while frequently mediating discussion and debate. With users' increasing appetite for continuous news and active participation online, as demonstrated above, content via the public broadcaster's 'vortal'⁸ that exists to promote facts, to educate as well as to entertain, can develop the core public interest obligations. This is important for the ABC's future activities.

External websites, such as the examples provided above, offer additional material that enables users to pursue areas of interest. Information accessed via external links on homepages can allow greater depth of navigation through these associated (and at times unrelated) websites. The external websites might have remained unknown to the user, had they not been linked to specific homepages. The provision of at least

secondary externally linked websites containing relevant information related to that on an ABC Online homepage would increase access to diverse informational and educative content, subsequently promoting an informed citizenry, with the aim of enhancing the capacity of ABC Online to develop a distinctive role via the Internet.

An issue for ABC Online, however, is that connection to external websites containing advertising or illegal or unsavoury material (such as sites that allow the user to download racist content or 'rip' copyrighted music from the Internet for free) exposes audiences to commercially oriented and possibly inaccurate or unreliable content. Such material does not reflect the ABC's Charter. The ABC's mandate to remain free of commercial influence would be endangered and its Charter objective to provide 'services of high standard', as per section 6 (1) (a) of the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983*, could be compromised by such material. Further, it is doubtful that such content would be deemed by the ABC Board as 'suitable broadcasting'—a requirement set out under section 6 (2) (a) of the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983*.

Clearly, tension is created between the need for ABC Online to protect children and adults from inappropriate content and the need to offer information that is interesting and/or useful. Furthermore, hyperlinking to additional resources or other information is one of the attractions for users in the online environment. ABC Online should certainly continue to develop as a family-friendly site, but also include open-ended, external links to relevant resources for additional information. There are a number of ways in which ABC Online audiences could be shielded from unsavoury content while using the website that extend beyond providing internal links alone. Arguably, self-regulation, knowledge, and/or parental supervision of children's online navigation are the most effective means for protection against unsavoury material accessible in the process of navigation from ABC Online. Installing Internet filter programs on the home computer is another means. Web-server addresses are useful identifiers, and a list of these could be included on ABC Online homepages so that the user understands what sort of external website they might be hyperlinking to. For example, a websites with 'edu' at the end of its address indicates an educational institution; 'org' is an organisation; 'com' indicates a company site that might contain advertising.

Importantly, however, web designers should include warnings to users that, should they pursue an external body of hypertext, any secondary

websites are endorsed by ABC Online, but hyperlinking from these secondary sites might take the user to insecure, unauthorised sources. Indeed, this is an initiative that ABC Online instituted in 2006 across many of its ABC Parents webpages (see http://www.abc.net.au/parents/articles/toddlers_behaviour.htm). Not only is the user presented with additional material that is relevant to their interests, but ABC Online becomes a trustworthy launching point, or vortal, for further online navigation. There is no reason why the user might not go to commercial, government, or educational sites, provided they are warned that they are doing so first. The user can make the decision, rather than being offered selective access to finite amounts of material. The user therefore determines their non-sequential navigational experience using internal and open-ended external links. Once the user has left ABC Online to go to a secondary, external site, the path they ultimately take will be determined by them, and might be completely different from that taken by another user branching off from the same website.

Conclusions

This article has examined the ABC's website ABC Online to establish the ways that the ABC caters to its audiences' needs through the Internet as it has through its radio and television services. It has focused on the ways in which the ABC's online content meets the informational, participatory, and entertainment needs of its users. The interactive facilities—such as voting, requesting information, or participating in an online forum—were found to be different, ancillary tools for convenience, rather than services of a kind never seen before. The capacity to choose additional information from an array of externally linked sources from ABC Online, 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. However, while external links are considered useful in principle, on the ABC News or Difference of Opinion sites, for example, they are not included because they are seen as an unnecessary extra service. In other instances, not including external links is due to concerns over users leaving ABC Online. This might be true of some users, but not all. Content creators for youth-oriented Triple J radio see external hyperlinks as a useful inclusion. Probably the most significant factor influencing the provision of extra material is insufficient funds or resources to commit to the task.

The result is that, in many respects, ABC Online employs no more than the traditional methods of creating and disseminating content that it

uses for television and radio. As outlined here, however, content such as the ABC's Backyard (rural) homepage does merge on-air program content with extended coverage of important public events, major speeches, reviews, and forums on issues of interest with a view to community development. Select homepages provide opportunities and skills from a wide range of topics and resources, with external links to organisations for greater learning (such as the ABC's Health & Wellbeing, ABC Science, and ABC Parents) and new products for the web only.

Convenience of access for all audiences is arguably increased, with the capacity to immediately acquire regularly updated information and/or services on demand 24 hours per day. Even if many of the ABC's online services are connected to on-air 'parent' programs or restrict navigation, being able to internally and externally hyperlink to these services at will breaks away from the rigid time-schedules used by television and radio. This trend will arguably continue as online portals become the first choice, rather than the second, of local and global users. This trend will be facilitated by the wider uptake of broadband technology, which is predicted to happen in the majority of homes in the next four years (2008-2011). This uptake might exceed that for integrated digital television sets or set-top boxes. However, in order to better engage its audiences, the ABC needs to re-structure the way it packages and develops its content and promotes creativity to take advantage of diverse media forms.

Notes

1. The analysis of ABC Online took place between March 10, 2007 and October 31, 2007. All the webpages connected to ABC Online and cited in this article were consulted during this time.
2. The term 'broadband content' refers to content that is best viewed using a high-speed (256kb/s or higher) Internet connection. Generally, broadband content is streaming video and audio, downloadable audio (such as mp3s and podcasts), or animated content.
3. While ABC Online remains commercial free, the ABC recognises the advantages of e-business. The term 'stickiness' is used in the online industry to describe how users can be encouraged, by the provision of interesting content and transaction homepages, to remain within a portal site rather than navigating elsewhere. The portal proprietor is therefore rewarded with greater advantage for securing advertising, sponsorship, or telecommunications revenue (ABC, 2000, p. 13). Being this sort of portal is not the aim of ABC Online, but benefits exist for commercial operators. As such, the ABC has set in place commercial licensing agreements with select Internet services portals who seek access to reliable, accurate, and

timely Australian news content (ABC 2000, p. 14). Examples include Yahoo (www.store.yahoo.com/abcshop-au), AOL/Bertelsmann Online Services (www.aol.com.au), and Tribe online (www.sydneytribe.com.au).

4. 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 <http://ted.hyperland.com/bio.txt>.
5. According to the ABC's 2007 Editorial Policies document, Section 9 'Links and Interactivity', point 9.1.1:

When linking to other websites, online staff need to be conscious of the nature and content of those sites. Staff must regularly review the content of all such web sites in order to ensure that the links are appropriate and relevant. Care must be taken to ensure that the ABC's editorial integrity is maintained when linking to non-ABC commercial sites. Decisions about placement of links are content decisions and normal editorial judgement and upward referral processes apply.

The complete Editorial Policies document is available from <http://www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs/edpols.htm>.

6. As point 9.1.6 of the ABC's 2007 Editorial Policies document makes clear:

When providing links, ABC Online will aim to link to sites representing a range of views. The inclusion, placement and commentary for all links to external web sites will be at the discretion of the ABC. ABC Online is not, and should not be seen to be, dependent on commercial or other interests.

7. I recently presented a refereed paper entitled *The ABC and SBS Online: From Portal to Vortal* to the Australian New Zealand Communication Association's Annual Conference on Communication, Civics, Industry at the University of Melbourne (July 5-7, 2007). It focused on the opportunities that the Internet affords for the ABC to enhance democratic participation through virtual communication, the possibilities for greater access to information and data, as well as the enormous promise for education through the public broadcasters' vortals.

In the paper I argued that, rather than simply being an extension of their on-air programs, the new participatory events would stand alone, offering users the means to discuss and reflect upon issues of relevance to the Australian community. Moreover, it is necessary that content is relevant for the rural and metropolitan Australian community, while not limiting access for expatriates or international citizens. Public participation and debate would be encouraged on the public broadcasters' vortals by the use of internal and external hyperlinks as well as the free flow of information that has been checked by the public broadcasters for validity and verification and is unhindered by government or commercial influences.

This paper will be included as part of the conference proceedings and will be available at <http://www.anzca.net/>.

8. Dennis and Merrill (2002, p. 93) use the term 'vortal' to describe 'vertical slices of broadband retrieval systems [that] allow depth and detailed information'. This article uses the idea of a vortal to describe the capacity for the public broadcaster's website to act as such. Hence, a vortal is used here to represent a website that encourages users to access their website first by providing reliable, accurate, timely, and interactive content, with provision also made for deeper and more detailed navigation elsewhere. This term is contrasted with 'portal'. A portal also describes a website that encourages users to access their site first by providing reliable, accurate, timely, and interactive content, but is designed to encourage users to remain within its website rather than navigating in or to other websites.

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