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Multiplatform Innovation and Participatory Citizenship:
The Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s Digital Children’s Television Projects

Dr Leonie Rutherford and Dr Adam Brown
Deakin University, School of Communication and Creative Arts, Deakin University
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vince.marotta@deakin.edu.au

Series Editors: Prof. Fethi Mansouri & Dr Vince Marotta
Centre for Citizenship and Globalisation
Deakin University, 221 Burwood Highway
Burwood 3125 VIC Australia
Abstract

This paper examines children’s multiplatform commissioning at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) in the context of the digitalisation of Australian television. A pursuit of audience share and reach to legitimise its recurrent funding engenders a strategy that prioritises the entertainment values of the ABC’s children’s offerings. Nevertheless, these multiplatform texts (comprising complementary ‘on-air’ and ‘online’ textualities) evidence a continuing commitment to a youth-focussed, public service remit, and reflect the ABC’s Charter obligations to foster innovation, creativity, participation, citizenship, and the values of social inclusiveness. The analysis focuses on two recent ‘marquee’ drama projects, Dance Academy (a contemporary teen series) and My Place (a historical series for a middle childhood audience). The research draws on a series of research interviews, analysis of policy documents and textual analysis of the television and multiplatform content. The authors argue that a mixed diet of programming, together with an educative or social developmental agenda, features in the design of both program and online participation for the public broadcaster.

Introduction

Children’s programming has long been considered one of the pillars of public service broadcasting. In Australia, prior to the advent of Pay TV in 1995, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) faced little competition as an originator and broadcaster of dedicated children’s programming. With changes brought about by the nation’s transition to digital television broadcasting, together with increasing competition and deregulation, a dedicated digital terrestrial children’s channel—ABC3—has formed a significant vanguard of the ABC’s digital media strategy. This presentation considers how content, in the form of rich multiplatform texts, is crucial in providing value-added user experiences that legitimate the ABC’s claims to provide a ‘quality’ alternative to the (largely imported) schedules and digital offerings of its commercial terrestrial and (Pay TV) rivals. Considering these developments in relation to recent scholarship on ‘beyond-broadcast’ textualities, our paper investigates the way in which digital content strategies cultivate a relationship with child and early adolescent view(s)ers.
Background: The Institutional Logics of Digital Textualities

Recent media scholarship has explained the upsurge of investment in ‘quality’ cross-platform narratives by media corporations in terms of competitive market strategies in the eras of post-network television, and post-broadcast media (Jenkins, 2006). Thus, digital media aesthetics and industrial practices are intrinsically related to the economic goals of media institutions in an age of transition. John Caldwell (2003) coined the term ‘second-shift aesthetics’ to describe a comprehensive integration of design (aesthetics) and market practices in the new digital/cultural economy of media conglomerates,

a growing and ubiquitous world of digital that employs traditional and modified ‘programming strategies’ in the design of everything from interface and software design to merchandising and branding campaigns (Caldwell 2003: 132).

‘Branding’ is a key strategy that aims to promote not programs but ‘highly individuated and easily recognized corporate personalities’ (2003: 138), thus creating empathic relationships with consumers. Crucially, Caldwell argues that successful synergies come not from the strength of a hegemonic delivery platform, but from the ‘quality’ of programming across platforms. Thus, success comes from ‘value-added’ digital user experiences (2003: 142).

‘Multiplatforming’ strategies have evolved to deploy television content to be consumed serially across a range of media. Drawing on key concepts such as world building (Sconce, 2004) and hyperdiegesis—a rich and deep serial narrativisation across media and platforms—(Hills, 2007), scholars contend that post-broadcast media textualities create complex narrative worlds that ‘support discussion, speculation and cultural production’ (Hills, 2002; cited in Johnson, 2007: 66). A key strategy for commercial and public service content providers alike is to facilitate access to representation through user-generated-content, cementing viewer loyalty and creating an ongoing relationship with media brands.
In their analysis of selected BBC iTV and multiplatform projects, Bennett and Strange (2008) locate the BBC initiatives in the context of their remit as a market leader, to experiment with and innovate in the development of on-demand content. However, beyond mere aesthetics, they contend that a public service oriented practice ‘herds’ users out into the world as ‘part of a mobile citizenry, informed and educated by screen media but collaborating and congregating’ offline, thus creating “‘real-world’ public value beyond the screen’ (2008: 116). The concept of educative relationships derived from real-world partnerships is one we return to in our Australian case studies.

The ABC’s Digital Children’s Channel and Australia’s Transition to DTT

DTT broadcasting in Australia commenced in 2001, but a raft of media policy settings designed to inhibit competition between the incumbent free-to-air commercial broadcasters, Pay TV operators, and new entrants into the digital market, resulted in a narrowing of the new digital media options. In brief: ‘datacasters’ were not permitted to transmit anything like a TV program; commercial FTA broadcasters were not permitted to multichannel; and the ABC and SBS were not permitted to screen news, drama or films in English on their multichannels (Given, 2003). While the national broadcasters were thus able to pioneer multichannel broadcasting for niche audiences, this opportunity was not matched by funding for new content.

The ABC’s early digital children’s channel (ABC Kids/Fly) launched in 2001, only to close in 2003, a casualty of political brinkmanship by the ABC Managing Director, Russell Balding (Inglis, 2006). However, after the change of government, Labor’s 2009 budget allocated $67 million (AUD) funding to the ABC for a digital children’s television channel (ABC3), thus making the children’s content area the vanguard of Australian terrestrial broadcasting’s transition to a digital ecology.

ABC3, from its developmental phases onward, was conceptualised as a multiplatform ‘channel’. Future-oriented discourses within the corporation and The Australian Children’s Television Foundation (ACTF)—the institution that instigated the children’s channel campaign—envisioned the
demand for digital on-demand services from the youth demographic (ACTF, 2005; Buckland and Dalton, 2008). In February 2007, Mark Scott, the ABC’s then recently appointed Managing Director, announced a radical organisational restructure, which was designed to bring digital media to the centre of the ABC’s content and distribution strategy. In line with this, Kim Dalton, Director of ABC Television, presided over a restructure of ABC Children’s, which was enlarged to include its own dedicated Children’s Multiplatform team (Brooke-Hunt, 2010; Dalton, 2010).

The ABC outsources most of its program and rich interactive content production to the independent production sector. However, in-house, a Television Multiplatform department is responsible for deployment of static and interactive online textualities and the management of the online relationship between its young constituents and ABC Children’s TV programs. In what follows, we analyse two multiplatform projects commissioned by the ABC in 2009. The television series Dance Academy and My Place, along with their associated online content, comprise ABC3’s two keystone Australian projects, marketed as such and developed with substantial (collaborative) funding. My Place and Dance Academy both won the award for ‘Most Outstanding Children’s Program’ in the TV Week Logie Awards in 2011 and 2010 respectively, with one episode of Dance Academy also taking out the 2010 Australian Director’s Guild Award for ‘Best Direction in a Television Children’s Program.’ These projects signal the significant shift in digital children’s television culture at the ABC explored in this paper, and are representative of the PSB’s co-development of Australian content for children. However, it should be noted that this shift towards negotiating a ‘glocalised’ Australian identity does not involve the entirety of ABC3’s offerings. Lower cost programming, such as game and reality shows, forms the greater part of the ABC’s other Australian content commissions. In addition, more ‘mainstream’ imported programs continue to be purchased and screened on the channel, with particular marketing emphasis given in recent times to the three series of the American(ised) animated epic, Star Wars: The Clone Wars. Nonetheless, the intersection of a greater emphasis on Australian content and the incorporation of multiplatform technologies have crucial implications for both the children’s television industry and child viewers.
We argue that TV-web-mobile synergies facilitate multichannel exploitation of TV properties as well as a commitment to a youth-focussed, public service remit that reflects the ABC’s Charter obligations to foster innovation, creativity, participation, citizenship, and the values of social inclusiveness. In this way, the formation of the ABC3 channel, which strictly prohibits product placement within its programs and intrusive advertisement breaks during their screenings, differentiates itself from the more ‘commercial’ nature (at least as it is conventionally conceived) of competing free-to-air networks Seven, Nine and Ten, and the subscription television channels. Commercial free-to-air broadcasters have often argued against provisions in the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* (and related guidelines and statutes) mandating quotas of specialised Australian children’s programming.iii These regulations, set out in *The Children’s Television Standards*, also restrict the amount and type of advertising in children’s viewing periods and has seen poorly promoted children’s programming often placed in ‘ghetto’ timeslots that arguably do not follow children’s viewing patterns (ACTF, 2005: 25). In addition, the multimedia or cross platform ‘extensions’ of these shows often consist of fairly static websites, such as cast information, simple games, or commercial ‘click-throughs’ to retail opportunities.iv

In its 2008 inquiry into the ‘digital future’ of the ABC and the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), the Department of Broadband Communications and the Digital Economy (DBCDE) re-articulated and extended the ABC’s existing Charter obligations. A Discussion Paper (DBCDE, 2008) set out a list of ‘Objectives of national broadcasting’.v In addition to traditional Charter values, key tenets that have traction for the ABC’s relationship with young people, in the creative applications examined here, include: ‘enhancing the intellectual and creative capacity of Australian society and supporting the development of Australia’s human capital’; ‘providing informative and thought-provoking content that enriches society’; and ‘encouraging creative endeavour and the development of new talent’ (DCBDE 2008). This policy document suggests that public service digital content, ‘free from commercial or other interests’, is an instrument of human capital building.
Dance Academy’s Circuits of Consumption: ‘Pushing Back’ to the ABC3 Portal

Interviews with ABC Children’s executives reveal a focus on situated identity and contemporary adolescent issues. They suggest an interest in showcasing diverse individual psychologies and stories illustrating young people’s resilience with an underlying, but subtle, progressive politics. Carla de Jong, Head of Commissioning and Development at ABC Children’s, explains the difference between Fox’s Glee and Dance Academy as, on the one hand, a ‘heightened comedy’, a ‘fantastical, prime-time, big-budget show that is absolutely not real life’, and, on the other, one that reflects the ‘real issues and real life of Australian kids at an elite ballet school’ (De Jong, 2011). In its first 26-part series (2010), the program dramatises the progress of Tara Webster in her first year at the prestigious National Academy of Dance. A country girl, and a ‘natural’ dancer, Tara has ambitions to be a principal ballerina, a drive she shares with her chief rival, Abigail Armstrong. Narrative impetus is shared between romantic and peer tensions, the drive for excellence, and the choices facing teens as they negotiate potential futures. Our analysis of Dance Academy and the ABC’s ‘second-shift’ aesthetics reveals that the representation of adolescent life in this project is not just about aspirational lifestyle and romantic peer relationships, but also ‘living’ with issues common to adolescent experience. Viewers are narratively positioned alongside characters in the process of forming, in developmental terms, ‘executive functioning’, agency and responsibility in wider social networks.

Terranova’s account of digital media economies contends that monetary value is created out of knowledge and affect of viewers (2000). As Murray (2004) explains, this affect is usually channelled into promotional strategies, to create grassroots buzz around television properties. ABC Managing Director, Mark Scott, in a number of public speeches, locates the strategy to build viewership across channels and platforms in terms of the ABC’s remit to provide a universal service—one having, by implication, a broad reach—thus delivering maximum returns (wide delivery of a public good) on the government’s investment:
The Charter asks that we provide content of wide appeal and content that is specialist in nature. Consequently, we look to engage not only with small communities of interest but to also bring the nation together around content that will generate critical mass [...] Only the ABC—as an established trusted brand in Australian children’s television—could have so quickly generated such a return on that public investment. And delivered it to 10 out of 10 Australian households, rather than the 3 out of 10 that Pay-TV could (Scott, 2010).

Scott is here recasting public broadcasting’s universal access justification for the digital era.

Under Scott’s leadership institutional strategies, ABC-wide, were developed, creating a range of digital services leveraged from its existing divisions. According to the ABC’s 2008-09 Annual Report (ABC, 2009), these multiplatform developments aim to ‘create content that is easily forwarded to online friends and communities’, building reach through engaging with the ‘new manner in which younger audiences consume television’, and distribute content through social media.

The multiplatform strategy for ABC Children’s remains primarily centred on the digital television platform—(that is, ABC3, its stand-alone channel for the 5-12 demographic, together with ABC 4/Kids, the dedicated preschool block sharing spectrum with the digital-only ABC2)—and online (De Jong, 2011). The development of cross-platform projects reflects and contributes to strategic discourses around user behaviour. ABC TV Children’s Head of Commissioning and Development, Carla De Jong, projected three distinct types of users of the Dance Academy content:

There’s the very casual user who will jump online because they’ve seen ... the promo for the website and have a look around, have a bit of a play on the games, and ... drop in ... once a week or so or less, and then there are people that really love the show and they are going to get on there and they are going to play more intensely. And then there are completely obsessed fans, that, as will be on everything [sic], they’ll be on the Twitter feed, they’ll be on Facebook looking for Dance Academy, they’re all over the shop and they really are umber-users ... who ... just want Dance Academy any way that they can get it. (De Jong, 2011)

Commercial post-broadcast television employs industrial practices, such as cross-market ‘stunts’ (Caldwell, 2003) to exploit teen properties: for example, using young stars as a link between different commercial products and platforms (Brooker, 2001). Conversely, the ABC’s social and
mobile media strategy (from its content generating divisions) prefers to conscript users as distributors of proprietary content that remains subject to ABC editorial control. Nevertheless, ABC marketing and brand management executives also work to promote and commercialise its properties. The Twitter feed for Dance Academy (@DanceAcademyABC)—provides ‘insider’ production activity updates, notification of awards for the series and its team, screening dates, and general ‘buzz’ around the series. During periods the property was not currently screening on any of the ABC channels, the feed ensured maintenance of viewer relationship with the series, by a series of orchestrated ‘flashback’ tweets, reminding viewers of particular lines of dialogue, often focussed on moments of romantic tension. In addition, followers of @DanceAcademyABC are periodically alerted to publicity outings by cast members, including an Australia-wide promotional blitz during the first screenings of the show. Recent tweets also focus on connecting fan networks and facilitating fan engagement with viewing, publicity and merchandising opportunities:

8 Mar 2011
Got friends who don’t understand your #DanceAcademy obsession? Now’s the time to get them hooked, encores airing at 7:35pm weekdays on ABC3!

23 Jan 2011
Looking for #DanceAcademy merchandise? Head over to @abcshoponline! Download season 1, grab the DA complete box set, water bottle or journal!

14 Jan 2011-03-17 #DanceAcademy reels in a famous fan with Kevin McHale from @GLEEonFOX tweeting his support for the show! Thanks @druidDUDE!!!

However, public service editorial guidelines on child protection inflect ABC Children’s management of their ‘user flows’ (Caldwell, 2003; Williams, 1990). The Dance Academy Facebook group and the Twitter feed do not encourage intimacy with individual fans or stars, and, though they offer some scope for comments about characters, their other function is as information channels about the series and its extra-textual features. Indeed, posts on the ‘official’ Facebook site in the early days of September 2011 not only revealed fans taking the opportunity to provide (positive) feedback on the show, but also the host of the site promoting the new Dance Academy magazine,
along with a link to the ABC shop where the product can be ordered (http://shop.abc.net.au/browse/product.asp?productid=600039&SearchID=12522360&SearchRefineID=20337697). For interpersonal and parasocial interaction, viewers are ‘herded’ back to the main ABC portal. ABC Children’s executives explain the challenges of guiding user dispersals in terms of age appropriateness (De Jong, 2011; Glen, 2010), content suitability (Uecker, 2010), and engaging affect through rich and distinctive content streams:

As far as Facebook and Twitter goes, they are difficult and moveable beasts, I think, for ABC Children’s … Our audience caps out at 15, so really it’s a very thin band of our audience who actually should have access to Facebook … because it’s not suitable for them … so we are always, in any platform that is outside of the ABC3 portal, we are pushing back to the portal … and so one of the challenges … in commissioning and finding multiplatform aspects is to actually see about what can we put on our portal that no one can get anywhere else, we can push back so that kids will come back to us and know that … the most rich [sic] content that they will get for this program is going to be on the ABC3 portal. (De Jong, 2011)

Inviting Audiences In

In a textual and reception study of the Warner Bros. teen romance project, Dawson’s Creek, Brooker (2001) contends that the multiplatform content has a gendered address, positioning viewers through textual strategies to assume a reading position as ‘girlfriends’ of the central male leads. In line with the ABC’s Charter obligations to reflect diversity of identity positions, Dance Academy’s self-conscious and, arguably, subversive approach to gender expectations is developed through the program’s episodes and characters, and in the project’s online applications.

The top menu screen of the Dance Academy application (www.abc.net.au/abc3/danceacademy.html/) loads behind a video loop in which a pirouetting dancer, circles to the series’ theme music. The background features a brocade-like virtual fabric with a scrapbooking ambience, suggesting a feminine decorative space. Lyric vignettes of Sydney Harbour vistas imply a tourist gaze. The application does have a section—‘Backstage’—that contains actor profiles and ‘behind the scenes’ glimpses of production culture, and is very similar to promotional
sites for commercial US network shows or DVD features (Hills, 2007). However, some of the content is nuanced to focus more on literary and creative practice. Instead of episode summaries, it offers ‘script’ pages, with links to video clips that show the same scenes realised in the television production.

The focus on creativity is continued in the ‘Dance Maker’ choreography application. Users are able to select a stylistic repertoire, and a pair of dancers, to choreograph a routine using the project’s assets. They can publish these routines to the site. The application constructs the child as ‘creator’ rather than merely a consumer. Executive Producer of Children’s Television Multiplatform, explains this view of the audience:

And this is sort of us dipping the toe into the water of UGC [user-generated content] and inviting the audience to come and make things and play. … [W]e’ve read … that in our core audience of nine to twelve, half of the audience are active media creators compared to, say, five percent in the wider YouTube. So there’s definitely a skew in this particular age group of wanting to [use] media creation as a form of self-expression but also as a social connector as well. (Glen, 2010)

The Dance Academy application links the television and multimedia narratives. It deploys the trope of the virtual tour. The virtual rooms contain personal items, which load a video sequence commenting on a character or the social issues raised by the series. In ‘Kat’s Room’, Kat’s camera loads photos of the dancer’s blistered feet, as well as more traditional images of her friends. The bedroom wall has been analysed as a site of identity creation in the literature on adolescence (Bloustien, 2003; Buckingham et al., 2005). Kat’s wall indicates not only creativity, or immersion in a world of digital technologies, but also a reflective agency. Her ‘deformed’ feet images reinterpret the TV series’ deployment of a body-image theme, and reflect on the sacrifice entailed by the passionate commitment of the elite dancer.

The issue of body image is elaborated on in ‘Tara & Abigail’s Room’, where an image-link loads a clip from the TV series showing Abigail crying about her developing breasts. Abigail’s maturing body threatens her projected identity as the perfect ethereal ballerina. Users can access Abigail’s laptop,
and her emails. A response from the plastic surgeon refers the character to *The Butterfly Foundation* (http://www.thebutterflyfoundation.org.au/), a real-world institute dealing with young women’s body-image issues. Abigail’s video-messages also foreground her body-image disorder. The first message, to her mother, denigrates Tara, Abigail’s principal rival, discounting Tara’s untrained abilities, but coveting her ‘perfect ballet body’.

A second set of narratives deals with the issue of cyber-bullying, arising from an episode in which Abigail disseminates an embarrassing document written by Tara, which rationalises the ‘pros and cons’ of Tara’s romantic interest in a more senior dance student. In the online application, a clickable link ‘quotes’ the moment in which the entire school is instantaneously informed of Tara’s private ‘list’ via their mobile phones. The video foregrounds the social effects of Tara’s peer humiliation. The user can access Tara’s email outbox about this incident, while her internet bookmarks consist of a ‘Dance Forum’ message board. A Thread entitled ‘girls who are total hypocrites’ records and polices ongoing bullying via social networks. Significant adult intervention—a message from ballet teacher, Ms Raine disrupts and ends this thread. Another example of bullying, this time non-virtual, in the girls’ change-room, appears in one of the script pages and its linked video (Ep. 2, sc. 40) in the ‘Backstage’ segment of the application. Ironically, this implicit critique of cyberbullying is made possible only through what may be termed a ‘voyeuristic gaze’: through the viewer’s surveillance of character’s private lives and communications.

Brooker’s (2001) analysis of *Dawson’s Creek* finds that viewers are positioned as girlfriends and shoppers by being offered click-throughs to ‘get the look’ of their favourite characters. While the ABC’s *Twitter* feed might foreground climactic romantic moments, the *Dance Academy* TV series and application offer socially diverse identification positions. The narrative invites viewers to invest in the aspirations of both the female and the male leads, and to empathise with their negotiations and relationships with family, teachers and peer networks. Tara’s ‘webcam’ journal documents the more stressful aspects of children’s aspiration to participation and elite creative endeavour: for example,
the anxieties surrounding school performance and relationships with teaching staff. In addition, her ‘camera’, ‘email’ and ‘phone’ content represent her as embedded in wider familial, academic and social groups. Peer and romantic relationships are represented as central and compelling. However, other video links depict one student instructing a ballroom dance class for older adult couples, and another taking leadership as a teacher following the excision of ‘hip hop’ from the Academy curriculum. These exemplify identity positions that are not confined to conventional rebelliousness and teenage solipsism. They also reflect young people’s participation as responsible agents within broader public spheres. Similar processes of child participation and gender representation are at work in ABC3’s other keystone project, My Place.

Technological Innovation and Participatory Citizenship in My Place

The ABC’s My Place multiplatform project is adapted from the historian Nadia Wheatley and Indigenous artist Donna Rawlins’ award-winning picture book of the same name (1988). Produced by Penny Chapman, the series depicts the experiences of Australian children of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds at different points in history, with each consecutive episode set in the preceding decade. This structure allows the characters—and hence the viewers—to interact with a number of significant events in the country’s history, introducing child audiences to, and implicating them in, deeply politicised issues. Such issues include religious difference and immigration, wartime conscription and trauma, class conflict and the experiences of Aboriginal Australians. The TV-series, along with extensive online content, effectively—and often subversively—promote an inclusive and socially responsible form of multicultural citizenship (Brown & Rutherford, 2011).

Like the Dance Academy project, the intricate My Place website—also accessible through the ABC3 metasite—extends the diegesis of the televised texts (http://www.abc.net.au/abc3/myplace/). Complemented by an additional site designed for teachers (to be discussed further), the primary My Place application serves as a hypertextual reference point to many of the series’ characters and settings, while furthering the program’s thematic concerns. As the home page loads, a panning shot
of the large oak tree, which serves as a focal point and framing device of the program’s narratives, is accompanied by playful theme music, children’s laughter, and portraits of each episode’s protagonists fading in and out of view. Image links, which enlarge when the cursor passes over them, encourage the child viewer to ‘visit’ places, ‘meet’ the child characters, and ‘explore’ their homes. From the application’s home page, a hyperlinked timeline leads to sections allocated to each episode or time period, providing access to virtual representations of the *My Place* ‘world’.

Viewers can peruse various bedrooms, kitchens, living areas and/or backyards of the characters’ homes and ‘discover’ a number of objects that can be interacted with. These clickable objects generally bear some form of cultural or historical significance that directly or indirectly relates to an episode’s narrative. Several short puzzle-style games or multiple-choice quizzes also appear throughout the available rooms and outdoor environments to be explored, positioning the viewer as a ‘participant’ in the project’s exploration of Australia’s past. Nonetheless, while the project’s online texts are designed with apparently abundant options, the potential meanings that might be generated from these are heavily regulated by the frequent use of expository captions and other strategies, forming what have been termed ‘didactic regimes of display’ (Bennett and Strange, 2008: 109). Thus, the gestures to creative endeavour evident in applications such as the *Dance Academy* project’s ‘Dance Maker’ application are more restricted here. Often, the interactive objects within the *My Place* site serve to bolster the educational messages the project seeks to put forward, revealing that the construct of child ‘participation’, which seeks to attract and entertain the viewer, also serves important ideological or pedagogical functions.

The Pedagogical Imperative: Balancing Social Development and Entertainment?

In contrast to the more entertainment-driven *Dance Academy*, the ABC’s exploitation of TV-web-mobile synergies through *My Place* reveals a more overt educative agenda. While both projects share similar ideological concerns, the *My Place* content lacks the fan-based circuits of consumption
and extensive social media deployment beyond its website(s), and is more explicitly targeted at the enhancement of viewser knowledge and learning. This key difference has significant implications for the ways in which the public broadcaster engages with its child audience, complicating the issue of whether the interactive material enables genuine ‘participation’ or facilitates an overwhelmingly expository representation masked by the implicit appeals to viewser agency.

Significantly, Tim Brooke-Hunt (2010), Controller of Children’s Content, characterises success for ABC3 as comprising three factors: audience engagement, establishment of a destination and reputation. Brooke-Hunt states that ‘whilst we are not ratings-driven, we do look very carefully at how our audience engages’, revealing the tension between a need to extend share and the desire to offer a quality experience for young viewers. However, Brooke-Hunt also locates the value of the project in its critical acclaim and distinction from purely commercial logics: ‘I don’t expect My Place to bring me a huge audience, but I expect [it] to give ABC3 an aspect that you wouldn’t get on Disney and Cartoon Network. It’s important to me to have shows that are not worthy, but are standout, that are real sort of landmark in their own way’. The My Place project, despite its record budget, is not designed to leverage the same commercial (and merchandising) opportunities as more populist properties; nonetheless, it has a legitimising value for the ABC. It demonstrates a particularly strong pedagogical imperative and explicitly targets teachers as a secondary viewsership (Brooke-Hunt, 2010). This dual address provides an additional logic for its often highly expository multiplatform content.

The forms of play present in My Place contrast strongly with the more commercialised offerings available to child viewser elsewhere, such as Nickelodeon’s Nicktropolis and Cartoon Network’s Big Fat Awesome House Party, where subtle forms of product placement are the primary driving force of viewser engagement (Grimes, 2008). The completion of the various online ‘games’ associated with different My Place episodes involves the attainment of knowledge, ranging from the origins of Australian cuisine to the significance of the nation’s 1988 Bicentennial celebrations. The more
didactic approach of *My Place* is even clearer in the project’s often self-conscious engagement with key issues also prominent in *Dance Academy*, such as bullying and gender identity.

The episode ‘1998’ focuses primarily on the struggles of a young Muslim boy, Mohammed, to be accepted by his peers and join the school cricket team. Met with prejudice that is directly linked to his family’s Muslim faith, Mohammed is met with repeated jeers in the schoolyard, with a chant of ‘More-hammered’ echoing the schoolyard as he tries out for the team (*My Place* 2008, episode 2). In the online application, the viewer is positioned to sympathise with Mohammad, whose profile entry notes that his family ‘moved here a little while ago and I don’t know many kids’. The ‘virtual tour’ aspect of the application sites each child character in ‘their house’, the same house in each historical era. However, unlike the voyeuristic observer role offered by *Dance Academy*, the *My Place* application constructs the viewer’s role as more of a ‘visitor’ to the child him- or herself. Similarly, clicking on a ‘cricket ball’ icon on the 1988 page, deploys game perspective to construct viewer identification with Mohammad, as in first-person-shooter applications. Here, a game that requires the player to master cricketing ball skills, bouncing a ball off the flat face of the bat 100 times to ‘win’, orients the player to Mohammed’s implied role. Thus the viewer vicariously collaborates with Mohammad’s quest to ‘prove’ himself as a skilled athlete, against the schoolyard bullies who deride his cricketing ability.

The expository regimes of *My Place* locate discriminatory discourses in historical perspectives, thus critiquing both monoculturist and patriarchal attitudes as they developed through various eras in Australian cultural life. A significant subplot of the ‘1998’ episode examines the discrimination confronting a group of girls who wish to play cricket. As Danielle informs Mohammed when they first get to know each other, ‘tryouts for the boys’ team are tomorrow and I can’t try out, even though I’m the only genuine all-rounder the schools has!’ (*My Place* 2008, episode 2). A confident Danielle even accuses the coach directly of being ‘sexist’, and the narrative’s resolution sees the girls’ team victorious over the boys’ side. In the multiplatform content associated with this episode, the viewer
can explore an image of several boys playing cricket on the school oval, with interactive objects leading to information on the sport’s history and equipment (Figure 2). A lone girl stands to the left of screen, her ambivalent posture making it difficult to determine whether she is being included in the game or relegated as an observer of the proceedings. Clicking on this image generates another caption entitled ‘Girls’ Cricket’. The explanatory passage, accompanied by a still image of the female players from the corresponding episode, informs the viewer that ‘cricket isn’t just a boy’s game, but until very recently it was much harder for girls to get involved ... some schools as late as the 1980s still wouldn’t let girls play on their grounds!’ The adoption of informal language and exclamation, combined with the use of dates and statistics regarding women cricketers’ current participation levels in Australia, communicate social justice values.

The more overtly educational nature of the My Place project is further revealed in the extensive curriculum materials provided on the ‘My Place for Teachers’ website developed by the ACTF and Educational Services Australia. The politicising function of this application is encoded in the various summaries of each decade’s historical, political, social, cultural and technological highlights, along with detailed, indexed ‘Teaching Activities’ documents, which are often associated with the TV plot lines. For example, Danielle’s ambition for cricket recognition, prompts teachers to involve their students in a discussion of gender equality in sports played at their own school and to extrapolate the My Place scenario to other contexts (http://www.myplace.edu.au/teaching_activities/1998/2/discrimination.html). Hyperlinks are also provided to a ‘Women and sport in Australia’ film clip downloadable from the National Film and Sound Archive, further details through the Australian Women’s Register, and other supplementary material, such as a photograph and summary of the famous Indigenous Australian athlete Cathy Freeman. The intersection of a number of social issues in the multiplatform content arising from one episode alone—from women’s participation in sport and schoolyard bullying, to the acceptance of religious difference and the empowerment of Aboriginal people—reveals the concerted efforts in the My Place project to reinforce social values which cohere with the ABC’s Charter objectives.
Conclusion

In the early phases of transition to a more converged media ecology, Blumler et al. (1992: 206-7) explained the position of European public broadcasters in an increasingly commercial setting as requiring an approach that encapsulates both ‘competitiveness’ in terms of product quality and ‘complementarity’— the need to offer a ‘truly different mix of programming’. The transition from PSBs to public service media companies in the intervening decades has been seen as producing a similar balancing act, between commerce and culture, necessitating a partnership with audiences as ‘active agents’ (Bardoel & Lowe, 2007: 10). This analysis of the role of PSB is also pertinent to Australia in the era of digital television. While new media innovation poses new challenges to public service broadcasters through the more abundant multichannel offerings of free-to-air networks, recent developments have also brought about significant opportunities. The rejuvenation of children’s content at the ABC is a case in point. ABC3 has not only formed a distinct and appealing identity as the ‘place’ for Australia children and early teens; it has also negotiated the need to balance entertainment values with the socio-cultural development of youth through multiplatform participation.
References


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1 We employ Dan Harries (2002: 171-82) coinage—‘viewser’—to highlight the tension between watching and interacting, and the increased sense of agency on the part of audiences.

2 A 1999 study by management consultants McKinsey and Co reported that the BBC received 33 cents (AUD) per day per capita, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation received 14 cents, while the ABC received only 9 cents per day per person (Lawson, 2005). A Macquarie Bank report placed Australia 17th in a table of 18 international public broadcasters in terms of total revenues per capita, below Spain, Canada and Portugal (ABC, 2003). Independent production of Australian content, on the other hand, is able to attract subsidies and underwriting from a number of federal and state-based screen media agencies, and through tax concessions and offset mechanisms.

3 260 hours of Australian C programs, and 130 hours of Australian P programs per annum are mandated under the Children’s Television Standards, administered by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA). C programs are those made specifically for children up to 14 years, and P are those for a preschool audience (Australian Communication and Media Authority, 2010).

4 See, for example, the online site for the Nine Network/Southern Star co-produced ‘C’ (children’s) drama series, A Gurls World (http://www.agurlsworld.com/).

5 Australia’s Broadcasting Services Act 1992 uses the term ‘national broadcasters’ (rather than public broadcasters) to classify the ABC and SBS.