

The ABC and SBS Online: From Portal to Vortal

Dr. Toija Cinque, doctoral candidate (completed) Monash University National Centre for Australian Studies (NCAS).

Introduction

The internet has the capability to be a democratising force by providing spaces for open discussion and acting as a source for unrestricted information. Moreover, it can be used to ensure that public broadcasting serves the viewing, listening, informational, educative, participatory, consumer and entertainment needs of its often disparate audiences. However, the interconnectivity of communications networks has led to concerns over the level of media concentration and commercialisation of the internet, specifically, that increasing commercial media influence changes the overall dynamics of the online environment (Turow and Kavanaugh, 2003). Arguably, this occurs where industries, such as the traditional media, have incorporated the internet into their corporate strategies. The implication of such commercial convergence is that the plurality of media control and diversity of media content promised by the internet is reduced, creating an environment which offers the potential for global, commercially oriented, media command (McChesney, 1999). Jan van Dijk (1999) questions the private control of integrated services and electronic highways developed during the 1980s and 1990s. He suggests that this trend is likely to result in public, cultural and educational services dominated by private, economic interests, which leverage consumption and expenditure from among affluent social sectors. In contrast, however, Compaine (2002) disputes the view that a few large companies are taking over the world's media, arguing instead that the internet creates a 'level

playing field' because of its low cost that allows more content distributors to participate.

This article investigates the ways in which the ABC and SBS use the internet. It will predominantly focus on the public broadcasters' promotion of an informed citizenry, which 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 broadcasters 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 oligopolies. This article uses the idea of a vortal to describe the capacity for the public broadcasters' websites to provide reliable, accurate, timely and interactive content. A 'vortal' is the term used to describe 'vertical slices of broadbased retrieval systems [that] allow depth and detailed information' (Dennis and Merrill, 2002:93). Vortals provide deeper and more detailed navigation elsewhere using external as well as internal hyperlinks. This term is contrasted with 'portal' which describes a website designed to encourage users to remain within its website (a walled garden) rather than navigating elsewhere.

In order to understand the capacity for the public broadcasters to enhance online public communication and democratic participation, this article examines the key aspects of virtual communication and cyber-democracy as they are relevant to the services the public broadcasters' vortals could provide. The framework of the 'virtual agora' is considered because it represents the ideals of a public sphere in cyberspace where people are currently able to discuss and debate key issues.¹ The theory is then

related to activities undertaken through the portals of the ABC and SBS. Finally, the extent of political intervention and commercial influence is evaluated.

The Virtual Agora: Maintaining an Informed Citizenry

The internet's capacity to increase the array and distribution of ideas, choice and opportunities makes innovative methods of expression at local and national levels possible. The public broadcasters' use of the internet could provide new opportunities for public debate online and extend the possibilities for political participation (Siapera, 2004: 165). More specifically, the public broadcasters' activities involving the internet still need to reflect their traditional obligations and to continue to serve the needs of Australians (and others with access) via online means as was achieved through radio and television services. Significantly in a virtual agora in cyberspace, aspects of the objective of promoting an informed citizenry remain alongside ensuring access to accurate educational and informational services and diversity in content for all Australians via the public broadcasters' portals.

Internet 'freedom' is a term used by O'Loughlin (2001) in the negative—such as freedom *from* (for example, freedom from unwanted 'SPAM' emails or from state intervention); or as positive—such as freedom *to* (for example, having the enabled freedom to pursue one's goals). Democracy is a term that is contested and many versions exist, for example, representative versus direct democracy.² Dahlberg (2001) notes that much emphasis to date within internet democracy rhetoric and practice derives from three leading 'camps': (1) *communitarian*, which stresses the possibility of the internet enhancing communal spirit and values; (2) *liberal individualist* which

conceives of the internet as assisting the expression of individual interests: and (3) *deliberative* which promotes the internet as the means for expanding the public sphere of rational-critical citizen discourse—discourse which should be autonomous from political and corporate influence. This latter aspect of democracy would be supported through the capacity of the vortal to provide wide-ranging and autonomous information flow which is independent from corporate interests.

Theorists taking a ‘deliberative democratic’ perspective, view computer-mediated communications as capable of extending power to citizens (at both local and global levels) to participate in new democratic forums, not only between government and the people, but also amongst citizens themselves, effectively broadening the public sphere.³ Dahlberg (2001: 616) sees the deliberative perspective as offering a more robust political model than the communitarian or the liberal individualist. He argues that both the communitarian and liberal individualist political models tend to present a unitary subject, whether the isolated ego or the undifferentiated communal subject, and therefore neglects the multiple differences between subjects within pluralist societies.

However, Poster (1997) questions the term ‘democracy’ in relation to computer-mediated communications. He argues that theorists need to be careful not to adopt a framework that limits the discussion from the outset to modern patterns of interpretation. Poster argues that the internet cannot be conceptualised simply as an extension of existing institutions and that we need to focus on the ways in which it establishes new social functions (Poster, 1997: 213). Ultimately, though, he concedes the best we can do is ‘to examine phenomena such as the internet in relation to new

forms of the old democracy, while holding open the possibility that what might emerge might be something other than democracy in any shape that we may conceive it given our embeddedness in the present' (Poster, 1997: 214).

Some theorists also dispute the notion of a single public sphere as becoming obsolete where various groups uphold their own deliberative democratic forums (see for example Tumber, 2001). Gitlin (1998) on the other hand, is concerned that the increase in separate public 'sphericules' might impair the formation of a unitary public sphere. He states that the argument proposing that the sole public sphere becomes redundant where deliberative gatherings occur, presumes that a rough equivalence of resources exists for securing overall justice. It also presumes that society is without divisions that could be made worse in the absence of repeated negotiation between members of different groups. Despite this argument and the various problems in determining the 'control' for the internet, the future that many will experience is still being shaped and there is much to be optimistic about. The public broadcasters' portals could encourage an informed citizenry through greater access to educational and informational services and diversity in content. At the same time they can contribute to the expansion of what O'Loughlin (2001) terms 'freedom' and Dahlberg (2001) sees as 'democracy' (as outlined above). They would do so by providing additional possibilities for, and access to, public debate and communication via the public broadcasters' websites that were not possible through their radio and television services. The online forums of the ABC and SBS that encourage further discussion of opinions after a program, or even away from matters raised on-air, extend the potential for public participation. Usually, however, these forums are connected to on-air programs rather than being stand-alone places for discussion and

debate. The following section considers the capacity for the public broadcasters to act as vortals.

The Public Broadcasters in The Virtual Agora

Competition for audiences from multiple sources (such as radio and television talk shows, mobiles and the internet) sees news and current affairs often detached from the circumstances and conditions that are relevant to an event (Tumber, 2001; Greenspan, 2000). More specifically, Tumber (2001: 97) argues that journalism in the information age is becoming less a product than a process being witnessed in real time and in public. Such pressure allows journalists less time to ascertain what is true and significant. As a result, the public gets pure opinion with little detail. Tumber (2001) contends that the role of the media as the 'Fourth Estate' to act as 'the watchdog' of democracy and be an independent examiner of power might well be over, as traditional filters that enable verification no longer exist. It is possible to argue then that news websites and education 'gateways', offered by the public broadcasters' vortals for example, can fill an important need in connecting users with other useful and relevant resources (both online and offline) and can thereby reinvigorate their Fourth Estate role.

Against this background, Tumber (2001: 107–108) argues that journalism via new electronic technologies may incorporate both *orientating journalism*, where background commentary and explanation are provided to the general public, and *instrumental journalism*, that makes available functional and specialised information. Given (2002) acknowledges that in Australia, the internet allows the public broadcasters to provide and archive full transcripts of interviews, speeches, live

events, and pre-broadcast versions of programs. This is in addition to supplementary material, such as journalists' and documentary-makers' sources and information gathering methods for particular stories on an on-demand basis. Given (2002) also points out that, aside from the cost of producing and maintaining these services, public broadcasters might, however, need to co-operate with other organisations in ways that might compromise their independence, if not undertaken carefully according to their mandates for operation.⁴

Public Broadcasting and Virtual Communication

Public broadcasters such as the ABC and SBS are well placed to offer key public communication portals on the internet. This undertaking would effectively be initiated at national levels and encompass access by foreigners and expatriates. Liff and Steward (2001) propose that local content provides a 'virtual' identity to the community. This has an impact beyond internet use, by giving the community a view of itself—an image to the external world which upholds wider community building and regeneration. In addition, they argue that commercial interests are less likely to have concerns for citizenship, equality, access, education, cultural development—core aspects of the public broadcasters' public interest obligations—as central tenets in their operations. As a result, these imperatives might not be realised to their full potential, or at worst lost, if the ABC and SBS are not supported in an online environment.

Aspects that contribute to useability of the public broadcasters' portals would include: (a) fast download times of webpages offered on the portal; (b) tools that facilitate navigation throughout the portal (users often ignore functions, if they are

unfamiliar, according to Bonime and Pohlmann, 1998: 21); (c) no SPAM initiated from the vortal to users; (d) no ‘cookies’ that track user movements through the vortal, or from it; (e) consideration of users’ privacy and security on the site; (f) innovative, interesting and original content that is not simply reformatted from other sources (e.g. radio and television); (g) content that is regularly updated; (h) access to both relevant internal (hyperlinks within a site) and external links (hyperlinks from a site). That is, the ABC and SBS must not keep users from accessing sound information outside their vortal. The usual online corporate strategy constructs virtual environments in which audiences/users can access data and information, but only within well-defined limits (see also Wilson, 2004). This ultimately hinders greater access to ‘instrumental journalism’ (Tumber, 2001). Finally: a vortal to the internet that caters for a variety of tastes, but maintains the public interest obligations. Some of these criteria are already demonstrated by *ABCOnline* and *sbs.com.au*. The ABC’s current navigation strategies, however, need to be developed further to allow cyber-users access to a greater diversity of information from external sites.

Since the establishment of the ABC as Australia’s first public broadcaster there have been those who are not in favour of public broadcasting in general, arguing that it perpetuates an elitist, patriarchal and anglo-centric understanding of nationhood and culture (see, for example, Scannell, 1989). Critics argue that if public money is to be allocated, then it should be so done as to cater to a wider array of narrow interests, as opposed to a homogenous, contrived mass (see Lewis, 2002). Oldenberg (1991, cited in Liff and Steward, 2001: 332–333) argues that essential elements for a public broadcaster’s vortal would include: (1) it having a neutral aspect where people feel comfortable and can ‘come and go at will’; (2) it being socially inclusive in terms of

the basis for membership; (3) it being a stimulus for good conversation; (4) it remaining accessible in terms of hours; (5) it being frequented by regulars; and (6) it being unpretentious in style and mood.

Support from both the government and non-government sources might be required to maintain such a vortal. This might present significant difficulties, however, since good economic sense and good public policy are often seen as opposite ends of a spectrum. O'Loughlin (2001: 599) argues that, if access was provided solely by the private sector, the prime motivation would be to create consumers rather than to foster politically informed and educated citizens. He cites examples such as Microsoft allowing the Chinese to access the internet through their televisions for £113 (approximately AUS \$60), the *Sun* newspaper making internet access and email capabilities free from their website flagged as the 'people's portal'; and US Free Personal Computer (PC) providing PCs for free to those people agreeing to include continuous advertising on their screens. He also notes that in each instance, new markets are opened up and new customers created (p 609).

With education pointing to the positive and negative aspects of the internet and providing some technical skills, citizens are surely better placed to demand certain advances in their communication technologies and how they are used, rather than having market-structured limits enforced upon them. However, to take one example where citizens are constraining themselves by market priorities, although there are now over two hundred search engines available on the internet, the majority of web users still access the default search engines that come with their software packages, the search results of which are sometimes fee-based.

While many events have been undertaken to promote online public deliberation of political and other issues, they are frequently singular actions. For example, the website called www.realjeff.com was launched during the 1999 Victorian State election campaign providing alternate views to that of the Liberal Party Victorian State Premier (1992–1999), Jeffrey Kennett. This website was ordered to be taken down, for unknown reasons according to the site's homepage, but mirror sites were encouraged to take its place such as www.realjeff.dubious.org and www.realjeff.stnservices.com. In many cases, however, the mirror sites are no longer up-to-date. Another example of a website created to raise issues for political debate was the website that targeted the Prime Minister, John Howard, called www.johnhowardlies.com. This site no longer exists online.⁵ In light of this, the question arises as to why these ventures should not be allowed to rise up for their particular purposes, and then disappear when they are finished. Blumler and Gurevitch (2001: 10) offer four reasons for establishing a more authoritatively based virtual agora, which highlight the relevance of the Australian public broadcasters' initiatives in this field:

- (1) a more perceptible form for the idea that, as well as the multifarious aspects of entertainment, commerce, advertising and social interactions for which the internet is used, it can and should serve public interests of civic discussion and participation;
- (2) with funding being allocated, it could aid it in becoming an accepted part of the political framework;
- (3) [a public broadcaster's initiative offered through] the virtual agora could stand as a safeguard against the exploitation of interactive civic facilities for ulterior

reasons such as commercial gain, plebiscitary support, populist upheaval or to appear to be accessible in public relations terms; and

- (4) one concerted effort would stand a better chance of ‘unblocking our hardened civic arteries’ than would multiple separate ventures.

A fifth reason for establishing a more authoritatively based virtual agora using the public broadcasters’ portals is that the educative potential is significant through the provision of accurate and independent information and data. As such, a public broadcaster’s portal to the internet could, in principle, be a vehicle for the free flow of information, education and broader access and would act as an educative force. While it might initially seem that the incumbent governments that fund the public broadcasters would take issue with this concept, it is important to remember that the public broadcasters’ need for independence in radio and television services has long been upheld whereby no government control can be exercised over the content the public broadcasters put to air by law. Therefore, it stands to reason that content offered online would be subject to similar rules and conditions as the public broadcasters’ long-established services. This would have the effect of not only maintaining but enhancing their traditional public interest obligations.

Conclusion

The nature and use of cyberspace is evolving and is still being shaped. In this changing environment, the obligations of the public broadcasters should be a major consideration in the development of their online future. With permanent major portals to the internet, created and maintained by the public broadcasters, citizens could

access information on, and discuss issues involving, the future of the polity, with this 'virtual agora' organised on a national level but not restricting international input. This pluralism requirement has the intention of 'extending social access and expanding the range of voices and views online' (Curran, 1998: 206).

This article has focused on the opportunities that the internet affords for the ABC and SBS 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. 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 both 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.

In summary, citizens need a reinvigorated public sphere where education, access to verifiable information, and a means by which to deliberate upon current political and other issues are keys to the future of virtual communication. The public broadcasters' use of the internet to enhance their public interest obligations, especially that of promoting an informed citizenry, can play an important role in expanding democratic participation in a new media environment.

NOTES

¹ Habermas developed the notion of the public sphere to describe the realm where critical public discussion amongst learned private property owners and trading partners took place on matters of general interest. All had the ability to raise matters according to the ideal that what they said was true and honest and that they could confirm their claims. Similarly all had the duty to listen. Under such ideal circumstances, rational debate would occur and a reasoned consensus be achieved. This is much the same as the notion of the Athenian Agora. Habermas also claimed that because the state took up the role of looking after particular groups in private business, the public sphere (once the exclusive domain of private people who were most often involved in commercial activities and had the capacity to engage in educated, rational debate and discussion) became a wider concept and not just a sphere of a private elite. See for example Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (translated by Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence), MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1989.

² See for, example, John Nieuwenhuizen, ‘Computers in politics’, *Australian Rationalist*, no 47, Spring 1998, pp. 27–30.

³ See, for example, John Vernon Pavlik, ‘Citizen access, involvement, and freedom of expression in an electronic environment’, in F. Williams and John Vernon Pavlik (eds), *The People’s Right to Know: Media, Democracy, and the Information*

Superhighway, Hillsdale, New Jersey, 1994, pp. 139–162; and the work of The Berkman Center for Internet and Society at URL <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/projects/deliberation>; and The Civic Exchange Strong Democracy in Cyberspace undertaking at: <http://webserver.law.yale.edu/infosociety/civicexchange.html>.

⁴ A specific case of problems that can arise when joint ventures are struck between public broadcasters and outside commercial interests occurred when negotiations between the ABC and Telstra began after the ABC Board's decision to engage in the wide-ranging policy of licensing *ABCOnline* content to third parties in August 1999 (ABC, 2000: 30). Here, under the ABC licensing policy, the ABC would retain editorial control while raising revenue through licensing *ABCOnline*'s content to outside interests, in the same manner as in its deals with smaller third party licensing agreements with America Online (AOL) and Ausbulk (McDonald, 2001). Telstra for its part was interested in expanding its online presence and had considered options such as buying commercial networks. The ABC saw an opportunity, as both organisations had a uniquely Australian focus (Fagan et al., 2001b). This partnership ultimately collapsed due to a lack of faith from ABC staff and the Australian public.

⁵ In 2004, the Liberal Party Special Minister of State, Eric Abetz, made a request to the Australian Electoral Commission to determine if the website called www.johnhowardlies.com breached a section of the Commonwealth Electoral Act which requires electoral material to be authorised. The site had been publishing what it claimed were lies told by Prime Minister John Howard and what it argued were the

facts about Mr Howard's lies (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 July, 2004. Available at

URL:

<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2004/07/15/1089694468477.html?oneclick=true>).

The website no longer exists.

REFERENCES

Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). (2000). *ABC Submission, Senate Inquiry into ABC Material Online*, (pp 1–37). Senate Environment, Recreation, Communications and the Arts Reference Committee: Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 10 March.

Albon, R. & Papandrea, F. (1998). Social responsibility and paternalism. In *Media Regulation in Australia and the Public Interest*, (pp 2–6). Melbourne: Institute of Public Affairs.

Bessant, J. (2000). Social action and the internet: New forms of political space. *Just Policy/ Advocacy and Social Action*, September, 108–118.

Blumler, J.G. & Gurevitch, M. (2001). The new media and our political communication discontents: democratising cyberspace. *Information, Communication and Society*, vol. 4(1), pp 1–13.

Bonime, A. & Pohlmann, C. (1998). *Writing for New Media: The Essential Guide to Writing for Interactive Media*, New York: John Wiley & Sons.

-
- Brown, D. (1997). *Cybertrends: Chaos, Power, and Accountability in the Information Age*, London: Viking.
- Compaine, B. (2002). Global media. *Foreign Policy*, November/December, pp 20–28.
- Curran, J. (1998). Crisis of public communication: a reappraisal 1998. In T.L. Glasser and S. Craft (eds), *Media, Ritual and Identity*. (pp 175–202.). London: Routledge,
- Dahlberg, L. (2001). The internet and democratic discourse: exploring the prospects of online deliberative forums extending the public sphere. *Information, Communication and Society*, vol. 4(4), 615–633.
- Dennis, E.E., & Merrill, J.C. (2002). *Media Debates: Great Issues for the Digital Age*, third edition, Melbourne: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.
- Fagan, D., Lyall, K., Lehmann, J. & Dore, C. (2001b). Keeping pace with the new media boom. *The Australian*, (p 13.). Tuesday, 20 February.
- Gitlin, T. (1998). Public sphere or public sphericules. In T. Liebes & James Curran (eds), *Media, Ritual and Identity* (pp 168–174). London: Routledge,
- Given, J. (2002). A digital agenda. *Southern Review*, vol. 35(1), 21–41.
- Greenspan, R. (2000). Give it up Alastair. *The Guardian*, GII section, (pp 6–7). 19 June.
- Lewis, J. (2002). *Cultural Studies: The Basics*. London: Sage.
- Liff, S. & Steward, F. (2001). Community e-gateways: Locating networks and learning for social inclusion. *Information, Communication and Society*, vol. 4(3), 317–340.
- McChesney, R. W. (1999). *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*. Illinois: University of Illinois Press.
- McDonald, D. (2001). Speech given to CEDA, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 11 July.
- O’Loughlin, B. (2001). The political implications of digital innovations. *Information,*

Communication and Society, vol. 4,(4), 595–614.

Oldenberg, R. (1991) cited in Sonia Liff and Fred Steward, ‘Community e-gateways: locating networks and learning for social inclusion’. *Information, Communication and Society*. vol. 4(3), 2001, 317–340.

Poster, M (1997). Cyberdemocracy: The internet and the public sphere. In David Holmes (ed), *Virtual Politics: Identity and Community in Cyberspace*. (pp 212–242). London: Sage.

Scannell, P. (1989). Public service broadcasting and modern public life. *Media Culture and Society*, vol. 11(2), 135–166.

Siapera, E. (2004). From couch potatoes to cybernauts? The expanding notion of the audience on TV channels’ websites. *New Media and Society*, vol. 6(2), 155–172.

Tumber, H. (2001). Democracy in the information age: The role of the fourth estate in cyberspace. *Information, Communication and Society*, vol. 4(1), 95–112.

Turow, J. & Kavanaugh, A. L. (2003) *The Wired Homestead: An MIT Press Sourcebook on the Internet and the Family*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

van Dijk, J. (1999). *The Network Society: Social Aspects of New Media*. London: Sage.

Wilson, T. (2004). *The Playful Audience: From Talk Show Viewers to Internet Users*. New Jersey: Hampton Press.