

LOST IN TRANSLATION

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We are living in a converged world. We can at last put behind us the debate over whether convergence is about one device, multiple devices or multiple distribution channels. And thankfully television is not dead. However, while convergence offers flexibility and convenience, we may have in the process of getting to convergence reduced our ability to think creatively and innovate. As distribution of content has broadened to a wide variety of platforms, the ability to provide a richer and deeper experience may have been diminished. And while the economic pie may not have grown and content budgets have to be stretched across an ever wider or broader range of platforms, audiences for this content have diversified and multiplied.

Today, I want to touch briefly on whether organisations have changed sufficiently to accommodate these platforms, in particular the television industry, and what are the consequences if any if they haven't or they don't. How well are our communications leaders adapting to this new environment? Can our content makers reach these new audiences and are the content budgets being stretched too far in order to accommodate more platforms? What role do advertisers play? And how do we compete with global organisations such as Google and Bebo. Is the key to success to think global act local? In what areas can and do we succeed? These are all really big questions and while I will try to attempt to answer some of them in the next half hour I hope what I do is to stimulate debate and discussion about the best ways to address them

Recently, as I was pondering what is really needed to think creatively and innovate, I read an article in the *Australian* by Stephen Matchett on a new television series called *The Wire*. Matchett referred to this series as 'perhaps the most interesting series in the post-network world'. What, I thought does he mean? What does he envisage is this 'post-network world'? As I read on Matchett explained that in a post-network world, people watch the TV in the way they read novels — 'at your own pace, taking your time to go back over bits you especially enjoyed' or '...revisiting bits that you didn't understand the first time'. 'In the past twenty years' he said, 'the Americans have reinvented the sprawling social novel of politics and society on TV'.



(Saturday *Australian*, 13 Sept 2008)

He was talking about great writers like Dickens, Zola and Dostoevsky and that the late 20th Century early 21st Century equivalents could be best exemplified by the likes of series such as *Deadwood*, *The West Wing* and *The Sopranos*. Further he said 'for the price of a literary novel you can buy the entire series on DVD'. But what most captured my attention were the words 'in the past 20 years'. The internet is now 13 years old, and it's about now we should be looking for a similar transition.

Not that the transition involves the demise and extinction of the latter form, but that a new form or news forms of storytelling are developed, refined, and not only compelling but commercially successful or at least economically sustainable.

TV Serialised dramas have been around for a long time, so where are the embryos of the new forms that would lead to a similar translation of story telling to this post-network world? Indeed the transition to the internet in the post-network world has, in some ways, and at least in the early years, has been diminished not enhanced the art or form of storytelling. Poor quality pictures, fragmented, amateur video, naval gazing stories proliferating on poor quality web cams and home movies. It has if you like been a mass transition to Funniest Home Videos, anyone and everyone is a comedian, even without folly and sound effects.

One could argue it has diminished our ability to tell stories, to innovate and to transform. Something has been lost in translation. Far from the web giving us more, it has in many ways given us much less. If we take, for example, the telling of the news, we can see even further how the ability to provide depth and extensive coverage has been diminished. More and more we rely on serious current affairs shows and syndicated articles from foreign newspapers to provide a greater understanding of global issues. It is often difficult to get news online through the major news portals of more than a couple of paragraphs. Further the temptation to 'cut and past' a press release has become so accepted that in New Zealand scoop.co.nz presents itself as a news site and is 6th position on the leader boards in the news category. *Scoop.co.nz* for those of you who don't know uploads the latest press releases and presents them as part of the news. It seems for some the idea that a company may have information that it may not want you to know is not such as in issue. I can't imagine for example Fonterra's joint venture partner in China putting out a press release letting consumers know its products contain life threatening chemicals that might kill you.

Nor could I enjoy this cartoon on the net. Not because it would not work but because for some reason cartoons do not seem to play a role on news sites on the web. It seems the ability to interpret the news with wit and satire is not something net users want, or so we are lead to believe. Could it be that the only reason newspapers survive is because people like me continue to buy them for the cartoons.

What the internet has been lacking is the ability to attract traditional storytellers, scriptwriters, television producers and motion picture makers to develop bespoke content for the internet. It's reasonable to assume that for the most part without broadband and significantly improved compression rates, the internet has not been able to deliver the quality that we have come to expect and that therefore it has been seen as a more utilitarian device for productivity and other useful applications. And while digital rights management and protection have been an issue, this has not stopped the television networks and filmmakers from getting on board and providing a range of ways to access their content even if at first it has been throttled to protect existing revenue streams.

While the internet has been harnessed to do many things that enable networking, what is still yet to emerge is the way in which it can truly enhance the art and form of storytelling. I think this is because to date it has been seen as a redistribution platform for motion pictures rather than as a starting point for telling stories. And while user generated content such as Youtube and the social networking sites enables everyone to tell their story, we have not yet see the kind of serial dramas and storytelling that is well crafted enough to engage a broad spectrum of viewers or users, or as Matchett would say the equivalent of a literary novel. I think this is largely because its precursor, the television industry, and filmmakers have not been engaged at a story telling level. Yet it is this world of highly talented storytellers that we need to transition to the internet.

Robert Hughes in *The Shock of the New*, said the that great virtue of television is 'its power to communicate enthusiasm'. In my years as a television and internet executive I have sat through countless meetings with television producers and internet developers while they have brainstormed what the technology could do to enhance their storytelling. We've all heard the 'choose your

ending' pitch, or the one where the story can have multiple story paths based on user selection so that no one user need have the same experience. Or the 'vote for your ending', what the devil is that, other than some vain attempt to recreate Sliding Doors. I particularly like the one that enables you to write the ending. Like we all have time...

What I have never heard to this day is a television producer, script writer or feature film maker tell the technologist (otherwise known as software developer), what the story telling could do to enhance their technology, and more is the pity. There has to date been a fairly wide based reluctance by television producers to get involved in developing formats for the internet. Some think that this is because producers saw the internet as not having a mass audience — that may well have been the case in 1999, but not now. Others because the technology is bamboozling and developers talk 'techy' rather than talk plot. All of which has served to largely keep the two platforms apart. While television producers are happy to engage in brand extensions on the web, they still perceive it as a marketing vehicle in which audiences can be warmed up for the real thing. Conversely, web development is not a simple, linear experience with budgets that have been honed to be a pretty exact science, particularly as platforms and browsers continue to be upgraded on an annual basis. Who ever heard of a web site being delivered on time and more importantly, full proof?

But while all this stands as good reasons for television producers to be wary, it in fact is not the full picture. Leaving revenue aside for the moment, we'll come back to that later) I think the 'alienation' has come from some or many developers not understanding that all great story telling — television programs and films, start with a script and not a functional specification.

The pitch is all about the story and not about the software or its platform. Let me however make one point very clear before I go on further. There is no lack of appetite for storytelling on the web — watching a TV series, catch-up TV, movies and other stories (Youtube) and so on is definitely alive and thriving and while demographically it has its fans, to suggest that the internet is not an ideal platform to do this, is well sticking your head in the sand. To date this mentality has resulted in television drama and story telling being distributed rather than created on or for the online platform.

Why has this disjunct occurred? Perhaps it is because the Television is not part of the post-network world. The internet is a networked platform, mobile is a networked platform, Pay TV is a networked platform, Terrestrial analog free to air television is not a networked platform, and Terrestrial digital FTA television is an unknown. What the free to air terrestrial television industry lacks is a networked platform. Unlike every other platform it does not allow one on one communications or shared content. The sharing must happen in the same room.

And while pay TV is a network platform it is not yet sufficiently networked (not everyone has access to it, and it is not global) to provide the flexibility of the internet. This then is a critical component in my view for Freeview to address if it wants to compete in a networked world. Not only because it needs to retain its audience for its business model to survive but because it needs a platform to foster its talent so they can innovate and create new formats that understand and harness the benefits of a networked world.

Freeview must provide more than a loose confederacy of television networks. It must be more than a brand. It must provide a network world which not only leverages the internet but enables its audience to expand beyond the boundaries of its television license holders to a global world. In my view, and this is a view I have held consistently, the television set top box must link to the internet and its middleware must not only be compatible with the internet but sufficiently similar or the same to ensure that the storytelling is not limited to or bogged down by the technology. Otherwise the creative divide between television producers and the internet will continue and the loss will be ours.

Australia has some of the most talented story tellers in the world. They need to be able to experiment, to innovate and to reinvent story telling, not because it is currently not working but because as the past has shown when they do, we create compelling new ways of interpreting the

past and all benefit. Our cultural heritage increases, as does the commercial sustainability of our local culture and our story tellers.

What we must not be is complacent by relying on the plethora of material or body of work already created by the TV 'networks' playing 'catch up TV' on the internet; While there is a place for this, much of it will be aggregated by global players such as the Studios (Hulu) and Apple iTunes. Audiences as we have seen will not wait for territory releases. Television networks will struggle to keep audiences unless at the very least as Matchett says, the ability to replay, watch again and go over missed bits is enabled. Most importantly and something Matchett does not mention is the ability in a networked world to share content. This is quickly becoming one of the fastest and most effective ways to build an audience. If you like a piece of content, simply cut and past the link and send to a friend.

So in order to start engaging television producers to create local content relevant to a post-network world we need to create a truly free to air network one that enables, sharing of content, flexibility to watch whenever and as many times as you want, and one which provides producers with the ability to innovate and create new content formats. Seems pretty simple?

Firstly it requires television networks to share a platform with each other and to some degree their competitors. Not an easy bridge to cross. Secondly it requires a middleware specification that engages with and is compatible with the internet and that is sufficiently cost effective for TV manufacturers' to embed in their equipment. And thirdly it requires an upgrade path to ensure it stays competitive with the web and the likes of the infrastructure investment by the pay TV industry.

Not that simple. And is it all too late? I would argue that there is still time and that to date there is little story telling on the web that truly challenges the ability of the incumbents to usurp their position. Let me explain why.

Recently the Australian ran an article by Michael Bodey entitled 'Webisodes leap old-new divide'. Interestingly, he drew a distinction between digital and broadcast landscape. He was referring to 20 two-minute dramas called *Cassie Has Dreams*, to accompany the premiere of the TV Telemovie *Scorched*. According to Bodey this is the first time an online only drama has been linked to a fee to air broadcast. I think he may have missed *Fat Cow Motel* on the ABC but perhaps he was talking commercial broadcaster.

The screenshot shows the website for 'SCORCHED AUSTRALIAN DRAMA EVENT'. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for 'WHAT IS SCORCHED?', 'ORDER DVD', and 'WATCH TRAILER'. Below this is a search bar and a 'SUBSCRIBE' button. The main header features the 'CFN' logo and the text 'Australia's cross platform network' with a 'Submit your news' link. The time and date are displayed as '9:42 am Dec 28th 2012'. On the right, there is a 'Dam Levels' section showing '2 weeks water left'. The central content area is dominated by a large image of a woman (Cassie Hoffman) with a concerned expression. To the left of the image is a 'Featured Viewer' sidebar with links like 'Who is Cassie Hoffman?', 'Why is Cassie on CFN?', and 'Cassie's personal website'. To the right is a 'Now Viewing' section with a synopsis for 'Cassie Has Dreams Ep. 21 THE ULTIMATUM'. At the bottom, there is a 'Featured Viewer Channel' section with the text 'Follow Cassie Hoffman's real life drama' and 'Choose a video below'.

Scorched is set in 2012 and is the story of what happens when Sydney has only two weeks of water left in its reservoirs and heading into the hottest period of the year — Christmas — with a string of bushfires surrounding the city. Its good drama and prior to its launch it had built up an audience with the help of Youtube and some loyal fans with all the usual capabilities including being able to Talk to Cassie, and Cassie's personal website. There are also some odd choices; characters online do not appear in the telemovie and there is some documentary style elements including the news with Mark Ferguson.



But what strikes me as most odd, and this is not unique to *Cassie Has Dreams*, is that the episodes are only 2–3 minutes long. Something web users and developers like to call snacks.

I can understand this to some extent if we were talking about a made for mobile drama but we are not. And, I can understand 3 minute news bulletins on line and other funny snippets in true Youtube style, but we are not. We are talking about drama.

When I've asked producers why 2 minutes or even 3 is likely to hold an audience they say its because web users don't like to sit around for too long rather they flick between things and don't watch anything beyond 6 minutes. This generation they say has a short attention span and don't want detail. OK, but then why does my 13 year old son spend his life watching online dramas on his laptop and downloading the latest episodes of TV show to watch on his iPod if this is the case. I tested this on a 25 year old and a 30 year old and again they would prefer to watch 30 minute or 50 minute episodes online rather than 2 minute dramas. So why do we think story snacks work or should we be truly cynical and view them as marketing?

I think the answer lies in the budget and the associated risks. Creating a 1 hour television drama is going to set you back about half a million dollars at least, so being able to create 20 for the same budget seems good value, or is it? This is where I think traditional storytellers, scriptwriters, novelists, start to disengage, because the challenge of writing anything is so great and so underpaid that the thought of having to write the entire plot in 2 minutes is while challenging not really going to provide the financial incentive or recompense for the effort.

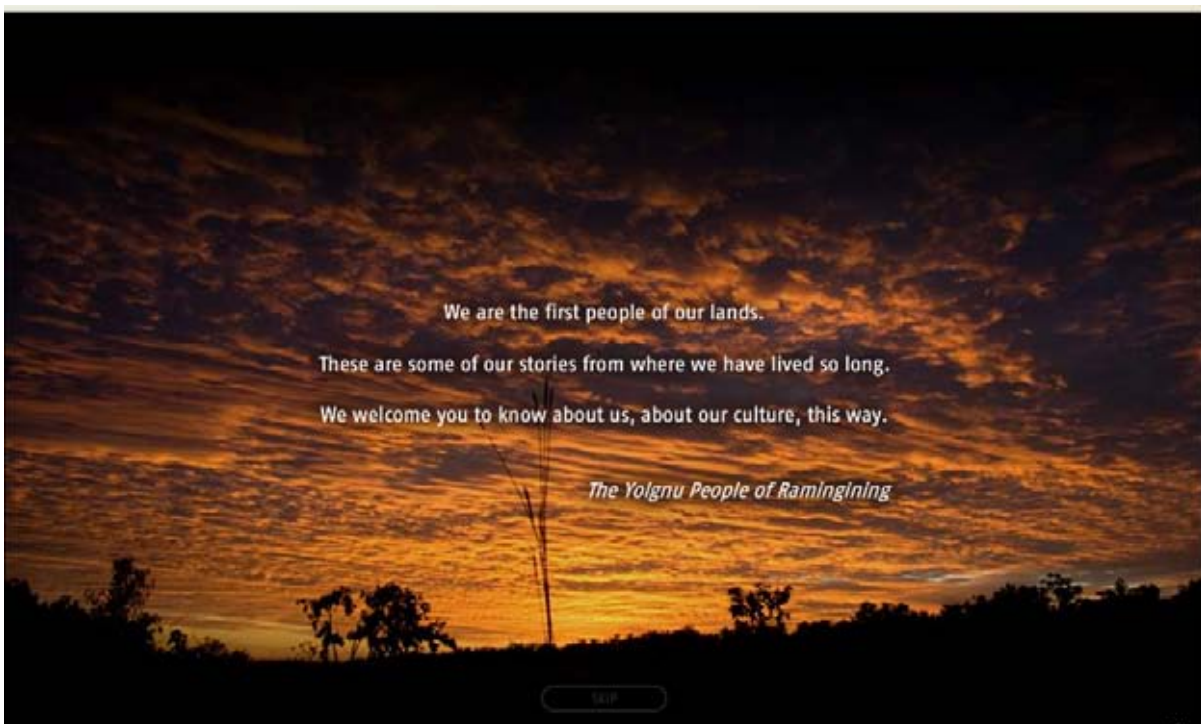
Scriptwriters specialise in using words sparingly to get across whole scenes, itself a challenge for any screenwriter. To do so in 2 minutes requires not less but even greater expertise, in an industry

that already is seen to undervalue the importance of retaining writers on staff or paying them in such a way that allows them to live a reasonable life. Perhaps given that cartoonists can convey entire political events in one picture there is a whole new career waiting for them in writing scripts for the web.

I can't imagine any 2 minute story, whether corroboree, dance, theatre, film or TV really giving me the kind of experience that I go to the trouble of making a date each week to watch. What are we losing in translation? How much depth of character can be shown in 2 minutes? How can the drama build? How does language and its nuances work effectively in this shortened bite sized world. It's a bit like eating sitting down to a dinner of a single oyster. Delicious but its not going to hit the sides of my tummy let alone satiate my appetite.

But, and there is a but, these kinds of experiments do help bridge the gap between the web and TV producers and help the two industries engage. And by no means do I suggest that the writing in Cassie is poor. Quite the opposite, this is a fantastic, courageous and well crafted attempt to begin breaking down the barriers and should be applauded. The fact that the characters can have an after life, Cassie for example, wrote a video diary from Bourke on the internet, does give us opportunities to explore new ways to tell stories and new ways to develop story using technology.

But hopefully, the web will also provide a springboard for extended story telling. Far from being just snippets, Ten Canoes has become 12 with a website that extends the storytelling of Yolgnu people of Ramingining community and enables viewers of ten canoes to learn more.



Like Cassie the content is short, but in this case not serialised but rather complete stories that like Cassie can be shared and other aspects of the story explored.



The production and community options surrounding it is far more simple, but the quality of the story telling, pace, imagery and production values are stunning. 12 canoes was made with around \$350,000 dollars or about 3000 per story. Not bad going given the quality and value of the work.

What it lacks is a way of getting found. Its front door is not Youtube, or a social networking site, and as such it will struggle to be found.



So, if television networks are reluctant to invest in Australian drama because of the financial return it can offer (or rather not) when compared with other less cost prohibitive programme making, then how an earth are we ever going to be able to fund experimentation and new models of drama on the web.

To date, few have wanted to take the risk. Funding for these kinds of experiments is sparse and without the help of bodies such as the FTO (the FTO was a significant backer of Cassie has Dreams) and Screen Australia or any other film organisation, it remains to be seen as to how far things can progress.

Ironically, it is the new players on the block willing to take the commercial risk. The telecommunications industry has not surprisingly been a major funder of such experiments, helping to underwrite the costs by way of either distribution agreements or contribution to budget. For example, *Forget the Rules* on the Optus Zoo Network, *Fat Cow Motel*, by the ABC, *PS Trixi* on Yahoo 7, with ad funded content. All of which are sporadic courageous and well to date more than the FTA networks have contributed.

This is because in a networked world the ability for the user to pay for content is enabled. I believe this is a critical element if we are to attract a global audience. The FTA industry can deliver high quality drama and television because it is ad funded. But if it is to enjoy the audiences commanded by the likes of Google and the other social networking sites now delving into television and drama content, then local advertising is less relevant and they will need to look at other ways to help get a return on their investment. They can do this either by carving up the pie with co-partners such as telcos and internet portal and provider, or they can create a vehicle to enjoy all of these upsides. Indeed this was the very reason that early on in the history of the internet television networks like NBC and PBL created online portals. But they need to be part of rather than separate from this network world.

This then leads me on to my third and final example, and is likely to pre-empt efforts by Google and MySpace TV. Just when you thought Big Brother had gone, its back! This time its on the web. Its called *The Gap Year* and it is a demonstration that finally the internet and television production world are coming together.

The screenshot shows a YouTube video player interface. At the top, the video title is "The Gap Year <thegapyear>" with a subtitle "The brand new daily reality show, from the makers of Big Brother". Below the title is a small thumbnail for "THE GAP YEAR". The main video player shows a woman wearing sunglasses in the driver's seat of a car. The video progress bar indicates 01:47 out of 06:27. To the left of the video player are four interactive icons: "Become a Fan", "Favorite Videos", "Use this Skin", and "Send-It". To the right of the video player is a list of related videos, including "The Gap Year - Fight For Your Right To Party", "The Gap Year - Going Underground", and "The Gap Year - Jaws 3". Below the video player, there is a "More Video Info" section with a description: "Andre starts a 'tailored' approach to his Gap Year with a house party and paintballing in Plymouth, New Zealand." At the bottom of the video player area, there is a button that says "Want to see more? Become a Fan »". At the very bottom of the page, there is a small footer that reads "Some of our content will contain products supplied to us by our programme".

This is a show put together by Endemol, one of the world's largest television format producers and maker of *Big Brother*. It brings together the world of reality television and the internet. I won't go into the detail — it is clearly outside my demographic — suffice to say it includes a 'housemate' from Australia, contestants are given a video camera for a year in which they travel the world in what we are familiar with as a gap year.

What concerns me and why I think we should continue to support the efforts of *Cassie*, *Trixi* and other Australian dramas is that not only will the art of story telling get lost in translation, but local content and drama will too.



We need to make sure that we are at the forefront of making this transition and that our filmmakers and our television producers are encouraged to take risk and to seek out audiences well beyond our shores.

To do this it will be critical for the free to air networks to join this post network world, to see Freeview as a post network platform, to invest in its talent and help them experiment online; to innovate and develop new formats; and to continue to build and locate not just local but global audiences. We need our story tellers to be supported as a critical and necessary component in this new post network world.

Failure to translate story telling into a compelling innovative solution for the web will mean that we will not be the creators but the distributors or rather redistributors of content if we are lucky and at best a marketing vehicle if we do not harness the benefit of this post networked world.

Thank You.