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Radio you can read? What to make of RN's new magazine

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Radio you can read? What to make of RN's new magazine

Abstract

This month, ABC Radio National (RN) launched a pilot digital magazine, White Paper, which presents "the distilled wisdom of RN" in a monthly interactive offering delivered free to your tablet.

Newspapers have already adopted "convergent journalism", the combination of different forms of journalism, with mixed results. So what can we read into RN's latest project?

Two of the more successful iterations of convergent media put an audio expert in charge of multimedia content online: former *This American Life* producer Amy O'Leary at the New York Times and former BBC Radio producer Francesca Panetta at The Guardian. Panetta helped create *Firestorm*, winner of a Walkley Award for Multimedia, a masterful interactive mosaic reconstruction of how one Tasmanian family survived the shocking bushfires of December 2012.

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Disclosure Statement

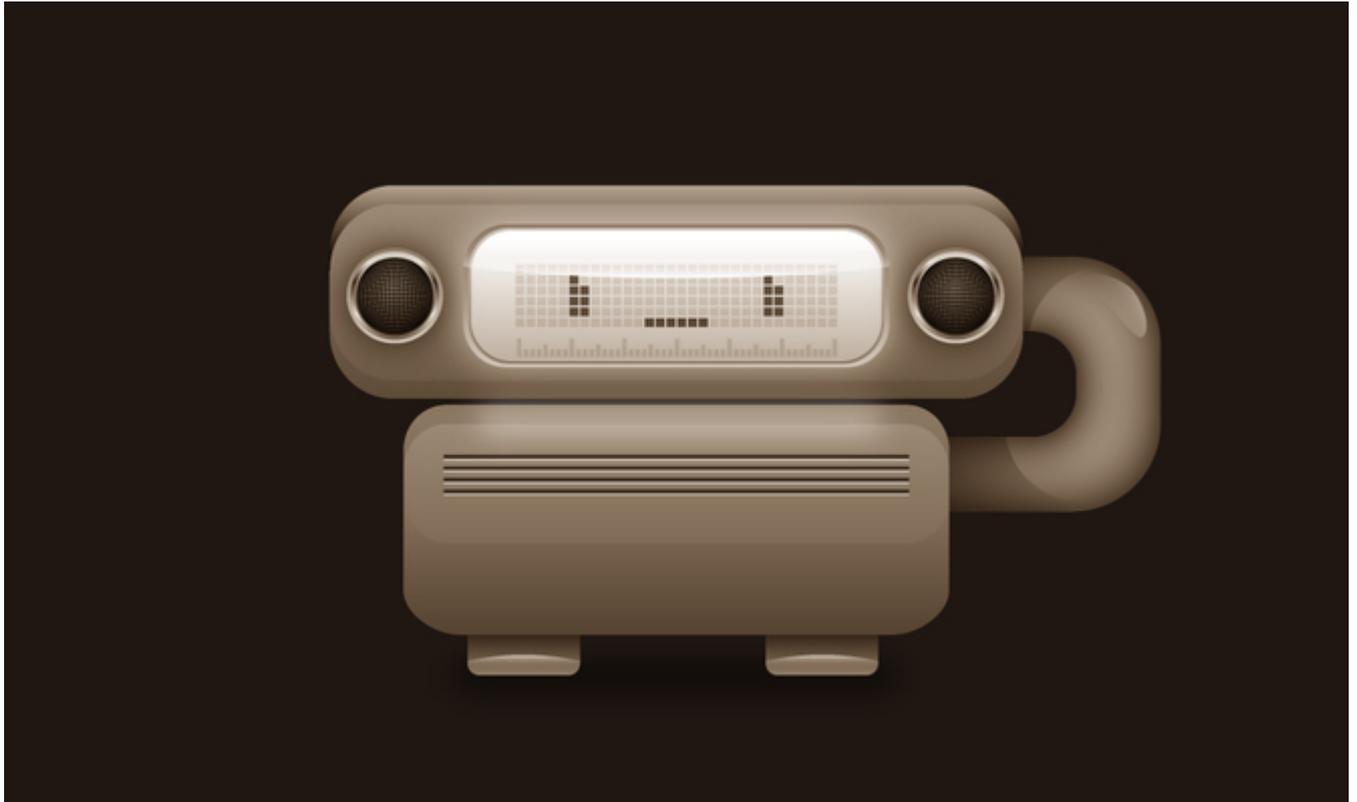
Siobhan McHugh has made freelance documentaries for RN, including a 2013 collaboration, Eat Pray Mourn, of which RN's Claudia Taranto was Executive Producer. Four RN producers and former RN producer Sharon Davis are on the (17-member) board of the scholarly journal RadioDoc Review, of which McHugh is editor.

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White Paper magazine offers ‘the distilled wisdom of RN’ in written form. [Constantine Belias](#)

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Extending the ideas network



Radio National – in tablet form.

More than two years in the making, White Paper extends RN’s role as an “ideas network” that is “mobile first”, RN manager Michael Mason told me in an interview. The initiative will allow the station “to re-version and generate [the] content in different ways”.

The first of six pilot editions offers four long-form features on issues relating to globalisation and technology, an essay by economist Adam Creighton on the rise of libertarianism in Australia and a five-minute audio “sampler” of five ABC programs on different aspects of drones, from the psychology of using them to their role in animal rights activism, war, internet commerce and news gathering.

A useful addition?

White Paper has a lot going for it. The aggregation of all ABC output under specific themes is in itself a significant service to the public.

But White Paper also promises to unlock the vast resources of ABC archives, a digitised catalogue of the social history of the nation that is difficult for non-ABC personnel to access.

Creighton’s article, for instance, embeds a telling clip from a 1971 television interview with Lang Hancock, in which he inveighs against the “useless cocoon of state ownership” of mining resources.

Keri Phillips, presenter of RN’s excellent historical analysis program [Rear Vision](#), has a clip from 7.30 Television and a slideshow in her piece on the history of Australian foreign aid.

An article by Anthony Funnell of RN’s [Future Tense](#) on the return of airships includes video clips showing low-altitude flight control and inflation, and a historical slideshow, including a shot of the [1937 Hindenburg airship disaster](#) that killed 36 people.

Claudia Taranto, Executive Producer of Features at RN told me these articles “give added value” to the radio features whence they originated: “We love the idea that they attract a new audience, through social media circulation.”

Then there's the iceberg effect.

RN has more than 60 programs, some of whose presenters have been occupying the same "beat" for decades, an increasingly rare accumulation of expertise in the public broadcasting world. A program can only accommodate a tiny proportion of the knowledge a producer has acquired. White Paper provides a secondary outlet for this valuable research, along with more effective ways to communicate it.

"You can't do data visualisation on radio," said Taranto. "If people hear two figures, they forget any further ones".

Thus Anna Watanabe's article on lunar mining extends her [360 Documentaries](#) program, including stunning graphics and a video clip from the University of New South Wales to illuminate the ethics of mining the cosmos for profit.

The journalist in the age of convergence

But what about workload?

In 2013 RN controversially made [senior drama and features producers](#) including acclaimed investigative journalist Sharon Davis redundant, citing financial constraints.

Are resources being diverted from RN's core business – making quality programs – into an attractive but unnecessary sideline? Mason pointed out that no-one works full-time on White Paper – "resourcing is built into our production flow". What's more, he said, posting a well-written, informed, engaging story online gets "incredible traction – it actually drives people who probably weren't radio users to the website".

The concept of ancillary long-form content came from the RN Executive, says Mason, but the White Paper project was driven by Daniel Stacey. The former RN online editor had high aspirations. "He talked about it as competing within the same space as [The New Yorker](#) magazine," said Taranto.

That's not as far-fetched as it might first appear. While RN's live audience share is low – [around 2.4%](#) of Australian listeners in 2012/13 – its podcast reach is strong and its older, educated demographic has clout. RN tied with Cate Blanchett at number five in the Australian Financial Review's "[cultural power list](#)" in 2006.

In style and content, White Paper far outstrips other public broadcaster offerings. The BBC has curated a comprehensive site around the [anniversary of the first world war](#) and Radio Nederlands English service recently launched "[dossiers](#)" that collate multiple stories around a theme. But White Paper goes way beyond the online journalism of most public broadcasters.

Interestingly, Daniel Stacey has been wooed away from his creation to another publication, the Wall Street Journal. Could it be that Rupert Murdoch, its owner, sees this new, free incarnation of ABC's premium Australian content as a threat?