



OPINION

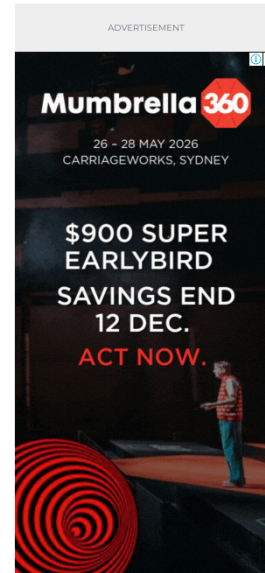
ARN steps up with 'intimacy at scale'

Throughout the upfronts season, TrinityP3's Stephen Wright has been applying a marketer lens to the plethora of announcements from media owners. As the season wraps, he looks at how ARN has defined itself against a new competitive set.

STEPHEN WRIGHT
October 30, 2025 11:14



Christian O'Connell delivering his own version of intimacy at scale



Well dear reader, we've made it to the tailend of the 2026 upfronts season (phew!) Yesterday ARN took a different tack from many of its media competitors (think Nine or Seven) and went big with a million-dollar upfront at The Star in Sydney.

You could see the fingerprints of incoming ARN CEO Michael Stephenson all over last night's event — he has taken quite a few pages out of the Nine playbook — bringing the showbiz and razzle dazzle of a TV upfront to what many expected to be a radio upfront.

What was interesting though, was that ARN used the event to define itself against a much broader competitive set. It laid clear to marketers that it is focusing on events, video, social and data. In doing so, Stephenson and team are seeking to lay claim to a much bigger slice of the \$16 billion advertising pie.

ARN no longer see itself as a radio network or even an audio business but rather an entertainment company with a multimedia platform. This is an interesting play and will be watched keenly by marketers.

Multimedia extended offerings have been the theme of this year's upfronts season, with the more parochial intra-medium wars (think Seven versus Nine versus 10) a thing of the past.

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The narrative we saw last night (and which has been in a number of the upfronts from [SBS](#), through the major TV players but also [Amazon](#) and [Youtube](#)) recognises how rapidly the walls have come down. Every media provider now faces a much broader competitive set but that this is both an opportunity and threat in equal measure.

On the new broader battlefield, the two core selling strategies that have emerged to date are:

- The immediacy of the retail opportunity provided by an integrated sales platform, versus;
- The emotional connection provided through deeper engagement with audiences through customised, extended delivery within a multimedia format.

In this regard, ARN is squarely positioning itself in the connection and engagement camp.

Emotional connection is a core strength of the radio/audio medium and one that has long been leveraged by advertisers. Listening is predominantly an individual exercise and the 'one on one' intimacy it delivers remains a strong platform for marketers to connect in a world of lessening engagement, distraction and advertising overload.



The crowd in The Star's main room was appreciative

Radio personalities have always enjoyed stronger relationships with loyal audiences, far more so than their TV rivals.

The lucrative contracts are testament to this (think Kyle and Jackie O with their 10-year, \$200m deal).

On radio, the personalities are very much the program content (hence the challenges ARN has faced in the past year as some advertisers have boycotted Kyle and Jackie O's show).

But last night was ARN's attempt to move things on from this. Radio share is far less about format, for more about the personality delivering the format, and we saw this in the long anticipated decision to take Christian O'Connell national. The market (and media) will watch with interest to see if Kyle and Jackie O will also eventually go national or stick with local shows in Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth.

At every upfront this season, the audience has been subjected to multiple sales lines and themes. Every media owner is somewhat struggling to settle on a single-minded proposition and theme amid the chaos of the market.

For me the pick of the lines yesterday afternoon from ARN was "intimacy at scale". It encapsulates the emotional connection of its core platform radio, reminds the audience of its strength within radio and encapsulates the extended offering into iHeart and other areas that broadens the offering and delivers against the new entertainment company positioning.

It is something which defines them not just against SCA, Nova and Nine Radio but also against a broader competitive set of anyone chasing eyeballs — think Amazon and YouTube.



The author Stephen Wright

"Intimacy at scale" is relevant and motivating for marketers trying to connect and entirely credible for the new offering with iHeart at its core. iHeart is a podcast powerhouse that has now partnered with the largest magazine publisher in the country, Are Media. This is a smart play and highlights how media owners can collaborate effectively.

In addition to this ARN has launched a new audio network 'Making the call' dedicated to covering and promoting women's sport. Another smart play, the free-to-air networks are all dialling up coverage of women's sport, leveraging this coverage with a dedicated network provides marketers with an opportunity to align their brands with engaged discussion and commentary.

Unsurprisingly Michael Stephenson — ever the salesman — was front and centre in last night's presentation. It's a tough advertising market with the traditional networks locked in a battle for screen share with the streaming players and tech giants.

Globally 72% of advertising revenue is now in digital with four players — Meta, Alphabet, Amazon and Tiktok — taking 90% of these dollars outside of China.

Radio in Australia retains a loyal audience following but has seen its share of advertising revenue squeezed within the new "audio" category. Other players (think Nine Radio and potentially SCA with its

proposed merger with Seven) have sought protection by becoming part of a multimedia offering.

ARN has no such ownership links and risks being left out in radio's game of musical chairs.

One thing was clear last night is that it has come out fighting, broadening its footprint and seeking to redefine itself.

It's a bold move but one that has craftily leveraged its core strength of emotional connection and the powerful relationships of its personalities.

The fundamentals of the new offering are strong and provide interesting new opportunities for shrewd marketers who value connection and the potential for integrated, customised delivery.

In an era of automated AI media planning based on bald audience data with minimal qualitative filters, ARN offers hidden gems to savvy marketers looking for 'intimacy at scale'.

Stephen Wright is global media lead at marketing management consultancy TrinityP3.

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