If you want to capture a lasting image of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation at the height of its powers, it might be a good idea to take a screen-shot of the homepage of the ABC’s website. But do it soon. If you wait a couple more months, or a year, or two, the odds are the site won’t be as rich and layered as it is now, given the hit the corporation took in last week’s budget.

With A$120 million sliced off its base funding over the next four years, the ABC won’t be able to do all the things it does now. The Australia Network – Australia’s international television service – will disappear with flow-on effects across news and current affairs and the ABC’s overseas bureau. An additional efficiency dividend of 1% means other services will go too.

Staff and programs will be cut. Some innovations will cease, while other initiatives won’t happen. And there’s the distinct possibility the cuts are just phase one of a grander scheme to diminish the national broadcaster.

The ABC homepage. ABC

Take a look at the website and you’ll see a showcase for managing director Mark Scott’s vision for the ABC. As well as the staples of news and radio and television, it’s a mix of new products, platforms and apps. There are the multi-channel television stations, News 24, ABC Two and ABC Kids. There are the digital radio services, such as ABC Country and Jazz – and the latest offering, Double J.

There are the websites catering for general audiences, such as The Drum and niche audiences such as the soon-to-be defunded Ramp Up. There are internet-based television offerings such as ABC iView and the regional video storytelling site, Open. There is so much available you can find yourself hovering over it all, perplexed about what to sample next.

This is what a digitally relevant ABC looks like. The site proves that the ABC is savvy about social media and understands the potential of new platforms. It understands new media consumption patterns, or at least it’s trying to. The ABC seems to get that the worst thing it can do is stand still and that its role must be to lead, innovate and experiment. It has taken its charter responsibilities to cater for all Australians headlong into the digital age.

Look at poor old Fairfax Media if you want to see an organisation that took way too long to embrace new forms of media, while letting entrepreneurs march in and steal its business. Of course, the ABC hasn’t got the same commercial imperatives and its funds are mostly derived from taxpayers.

But there is equally fierce competition in public broadcasting for audience share and the ABC stands to lose dearly if it allows others to entice listeners, viewers and, nowadays, readers away.

It’s in this context that ABC’s Radio National Breakfast host Ellen Fanning’s question to Mark Scott last week was so interesting. She asked the ABC managing director whether his drive to spread ABC services thinly had made the corporation more vulnerable. It was a legitimate line of inquiry, given some of those services will inevitably be terminated. Scott’s answer amounted to a self-appraisal of his tenure:

The ABC would be much weaker today if we weren’t leaders in innovation, if we hadn’t paved the way to catch up television with iView, if we hadn’t gone down the multichannel road. I think as a broadcaster you have no alternative but to invest in the digital future of the organisation.

I think we would have been more vulnerable if we had just been an old-fashioned radio and television network with one TV channel, with only a couple of radio channels with no online and mobile presence. Our audiences would be smaller, we would be less relevant. We are relevant and compelling to the Australian public today because of the investment we made in the new.
The criticism Scott was responding to is not new. It was a resounding theme during David Hill’s term as managing director, from 1987 to 1995. In the mid-1990s I asked Hill much the same question, although then it had a sting in the tail because the ABC was accused of outsourcing its programming as a result of diversification and consequently losing some of its editorial integrity to commercial interests.

Back then, Hill’s answer wasn’t convincing. In fact he didn’t last much longer in the job. But Scott’s answer now has credibility. The ABC has had no choice but to experiment and create and expand. It would have been easy not to but that would have been a reckless strategy.

In addition, as Scott will happily tell you, at least two of these innovations – iView and News24 – were largely built on efficiency savings, although this glosses over the frustration felt by program-makers in other parts of the ABC about the way their budgets were cut to build the TV news channel.

The downside of running so many things on wafer-thin resources is that when a 1% efficiency dividend is imposed the most likely result is the closure of entire services. So now the ABC has to decide what to cut. Many of the new products have proved to be winners and have filled a niche. Several have harnessed the potential of the new technology to create new purposes for the national broadcaster.

ABC Open has captured Australian stories in engaging and accessible ways and given remote communities a new voice. The Drum online created a new forum for informed opinion, breaking the near-monopoly and the closed-shop of the newspapers’ opinion pages. Double Jay refocused the output of Dig Radio, although bringing new broadcasters on staff just a month before the budget may not have been the brightest idea. It’s hard to imagine the ABC now retreating from these bold ventures.

Presumably the government has not forgotten that famous quote from within the federal Coalition that the ABC represents “our enemies talking to our friends”? It would be wise not to underestimate the affection held for the ABC as the most trusted and respected media organisation in the country.

I would suggest the public already senses that axing the Australia Network looks like a gift to Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp, which lost its bid for the service under the Gillard Government. As Scott told Fanning:

> We have the overwhelming support of the vast majority of the Australian public and when [the government] considers our funding future they should consider the very important role the ABC plays in the lives of millions of Australians every day.