

THIRD EDITION

MEDIA

FROM CHAOS TO CLARITY
AND BACK AGAIN

JUDY UNGAR FRANKS

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B L O O M S B U R Y

“Essential reading for media practitioners. Judy Ungar Franks’s book bridges theory and practice, mapping tectonic shifts in the media landscape and offering an unflinching, practical mindset for navigating constant change with integrity and impact.”

—**Sean McGlade**, Senior Vice President of Talent and Learning,
American Association of Advertising Agencies

“As a media executive and professor, I rely on this book to help students understand today’s dynamic, ever-changing media ecosystem. This third edition is a must-read for the industry and classroom alike.”

—**Scott Schiller**, Assistant Professor, Leonard N. Stern School of Business,
New York University, USA

“A refreshing and optimistic perspective for navigating today’s very turbulent media waters. This book challenges conventional media wisdom and provides a new framework for the evolving consumer experience.”

—**Michael Moynihan**, Senior Vice President of Brand, Marketing, Insights and Partnerships,
The LEGO Group

An essential guide to understanding the complexity of today’s digital media ecosystem and the forces shaping its future.

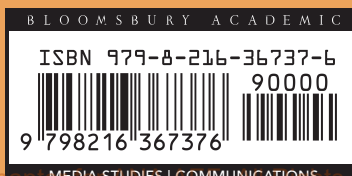
Exploring the evolution of media from the analog to the digital world, this book applies established theory and time-tested frameworks such as the Five Global Truths and the 3Cs (Consumers, Content, and Channels) to help readers make sense of today’s turbulent media landscape. The digital media landscape is more complex than ever, with platforms becoming dominant gatekeepers, audience attention increasingly fragmenting, and business models under stress. Judy Ungar Franks unpacks these issues and challenges readers to consider whether the industry will regain clarity or fall into deeper chaos.

The third edition features new sections on the business of media and on future media transformations from individualized chaos to consolidated clarity. In a world where such clarity is fleeting, this book empowers readers to cut through the noise and anticipate what comes next.

Established theory comes alive with dynamic case studies and engaging discussion questions to fuel understanding for students in the classroom and media professionals worldwide.

JUDY UNGAR FRANKS is Professor at the Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications at Northwestern University, USA.

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Media from Chaos to Clarity and Back Again

Third Edition

Judy Ungar Franks

**Foreword by
Charles Whitaker**

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3

The Five Global Truths

As we journeyed out of the Newtonian Media World and through the turbulent transition toward a digital media era, we quickly realized something: the rules we once trusted were bending in strange and unexpected ways. What had seemed fixed and stable began to blur, stretch, and sometimes even contradict itself. Certainty was gone. Familiar patterns fractured. Predictable systems gave way to chaos.

We weren't just watching history unfold. We were living it. How could we make sense of what we were seeing? When the landscape is stable, a map is enough. But when the terrain itself is shifting—when landmarks disappear and the roads themselves move—you need something else. You need a compass.

A compass doesn't promise a specific destination. It doesn't offer guarantees. It provides a sense of direction. It helps you navigate when the world around you refuses to stay still.

That's exactly why we built the Five Global Truths (Franks 2011). They emerged from close observation of how channels evolved, how content adapted, and how consumers changed. These principles explained the forces that shattered the Newtonian media system and helped us move forward with a bit of clarity in a time of disruption.

The Five Global Truths were never about restoring order. They were about learning to move forward, intelligently and intentionally, through disruption.

In this chapter, we revisit each truth: how it emerged, the technology that catalyzed it, the pioneers who illuminated its power, and its impact on the 3Cs of media—Consumers, Content, and Channels. We also examine how each truth held up over time and how they continue to explain the media realities we face today.

The Five Global Truths Defined

Before we dive deeper, here's a quick orientation to each of the five points on the compass known as The Five Global Truths:

Global Truth #1: Convergence

Communication channels were once separate and distinct. Each operated through different underlying technologies. But as digital capabilities advanced, those technical differences began to collapse. Channels that had operated independently became increasingly similar in both function and form. An industry built around individual communication systems had to prepare for the convergence of all content onto digital channels. And guess what? They all came with screens.

Global Truth #2: Symbiosis

Thanks to convergence, the same content (as long as it's digitized) can now appear across many different digital channels. At first, it seemed like channels would now directly compete for audience attention. But a new opportunity emerged: channels could work together by telling different parts of a larger transmedia story. When each channel offers something new and meaningful to the audience, the content experience becomes richer and more rewarding. This is the essence of Symbiosis.

Global Truth #3: Circuits

In the analog era, content moved through fixed pathways—flowing from sender to receiver with little opportunity for sharing or amplification. Digitization changed everything. Media circuits opened, and content could now move freely from one digital channel to another. Content mobility became frictionless. Audiences, once passive receivers, became active accelerators. They could now spread content across vast networks at the speed of share.

Global Truth #4: Brands

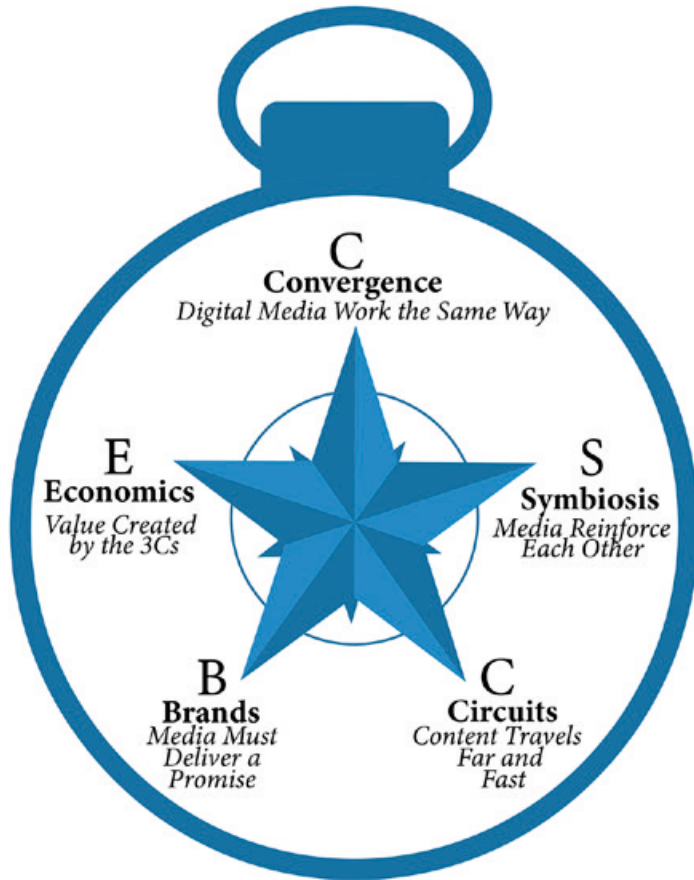
Media were once defined by their distribution technology, with each format tied to a specific channel and mode of delivery. But digital convergence broke those ties. As content began to flow across platforms, function alone was no longer enough. To survive—and to thrive—media had to stand for more than the technical capabilities of a channel. They had to become transmedia brands that were built on promises delivered to the audience across any and every channel—today, tomorrow, and into the future.

Global Truth #5: Economics

In the media economy, nothing sustainable is given away for free. Healthy media economics depends on reciprocal value creation across Content, Consumers, and Channels. The relative importance of each of these three components will shift over time. But all must be considered when assessing the health and vitality of the media ecosystem. When any part is neglected or undervalued, the entire system is put at risk.

The Five Global Truths

A Compass to Navigate Digital Media Transformation



The Story behind Each Global Truth

Now that we've laid out the Five Global Truths, it's time to unpack each one. There's a lot beneath the surface—technological shifts, pioneering responses, and lasting impacts on Consumers, Content, and Channels. Each truth tells its own story, and together, they help us understand how the media ecosystem continues to evolve.

So let's get started.

Global Truth #1: Convergence

Convergence (n.): the merging of distinct technologies, industries or devices into a unified whole. (Source: Merriam-Webster.com)

Back in the Newtonian Media World, the media were separate and distinct. We built an entire industry, along with business models that treated each medium as its own entity. And rightfully so. To readers who don't distinguish much between their television, their laptop, their tablet, or their mobile phone, it may seem unfathomable that we used to rely upon different communication technologies to do different things. The fact that we can talk, we can read, we can watch, we can listen, and we can post all from the same device is a relatively new phenomenon (c. 2007)—thank you, iPhone! Digital technology was once confined to computers. But once every media form imaginable began to adopt digital technology, the differences among the media vanished. Welcome to Convergence.

With digital technology came the great screen democracy. Screens used to be limited to televisions and computers. Suddenly, communication modalities that never involved a screen were being delivered on screen devices. Printed words, pictures, music, and our conversations became the domain of screens. As long as content was digitized, it could land on a screen. And the pioneers who caught on took advantage.

Speaking of pioneers, we have to give Apple the credit it is due. This brand, single-handedly, understood the power and attraction of a brilliantly designed digital screen and gave us product innovation that changed the face of every device imaginable. Apple made us rethink what screen devices could be used for. It introduced the idea that a personal computer could be used for more than left-brained pursuits. With the suite of creative tools that was standard on every Mac, we could use our computers to fuel the right sides of our brains as well.

With the launch of the iPhone, Apple transformed mobile phones from talking and messaging devices into *the internet in our pockets* (Jobs 2007). And although Microsoft launched the first tablet computer nearly a decade before, Apple realized that the tablet was more than a smaller, less functional computer. They reimagined the device to blend the screen worlds of work and play. Quite simply, we would not have experienced convergence without Apple's foresight to shift our mindsets toward screen

devices. They made us ready and willing to pick up any device available to fulfill any host of wants and needs.

While rethinking screens was an important first step in understanding the forces of convergence, something else quite profound had to happen: the content that we consumed on one device needed to become seamlessly available across all our devices. Apple had the brilliant foresight to make this happen as well. Since Apple used the same basic operating system for all of its devices, consumers could simply pick up the nearest Apple device they had available and consume the same content wherever, whenever, and however they chose. Once the same content could be consumed on any digital device, we were able to tear down the silos that used to confine content to a specific channel. Today, the idea of screen neutrality has become second nature. By tearing down the silos across their own screen devices, Apple shaped an entirely new media experience: one that replaces certainty of a bygone media era with convergence.

While Apple was busy synchronizing digital screens, legacy media companies that were historically confined to specific modes of distribution began to break out of their silos. They began to distribute content in digital formats that could be consumed on and across all these screen devices. To today's reader, this may seem like such an obvious thing to do. But stop and think about the legacy of most media channels: their distribution used to define them. Literally! Newspapers had the word "paper" ingrained in their identities. In television, we used to distinguish between "broadcast" and "cable" networks simply because some networks were around when signals were broadcast over the air while others were formed in the era of cable distribution. And the term "website" quite literally referred to a specific "site" on the World Wide Web. When your industry is named after your legacy, it's no small feat to venture beyond the boundaries of your original channel. However, in the late aughts, nearly every sector within the media ecosystem did just that.

Take Hulu, for example. When it launched in 2008, it was a rare collaboration between broadcast rivals NBC, FOX, and later ABC—an alliance formed to defend against rising digital disruptors. At the time, television was still viewed by many as a passive, even potentially harmful medium—"a vast wasteland," as FCC Chairman Newton Minow (1961) famously called it. Computers, by contrast, were considered tools of enrichment. Hulu's now-famous Super Bowl ad, featuring Alec Baldwin, flipped that script with a smirk: "What are you going to do? Turn off

both your TV and your computer?” (Hulu 2009). It was more than a punchline—it marked the moment when screens converged and the lines between media types began to blur. In retrospect, Hulu was a bold experiment in shared control—but once streaming matured, the alliance dissolved. Today, Hulu is solely owned by Disney; the other networks have since launched streaming platforms of their own.

Some legacy media made the transition more gracefully than others. Some are still trying to figure it out. For years, both systems—legacy and digital—existed side by side. Newspapers launched digital editions but continued delivering the morning paper. Television networks built streaming apps while maintaining linear broadcast prime-time lineups. Radio stations still broadcast over the airwaves while streaming content through digital apps. These weren’t just transitional experiments—they were signs of a bridge period in which media companies kept one foot in the past while building for the digital future. For some, this coexistence stretched on for decades. The lines didn’t blur overnight—they eroded slowly.

One thing, however, became clear: media companies that refused to embrace convergence and clung too tightly to their analog past faced serious consequences. Nowhere is this more evident than in the newspaper industry. National and regional players that adapted early to digital delivery models found ways to survive, even thrive. But those who stayed rooted in print for too long—particularly local newspapers—have struggled or disappeared altogether. According to the Medill Local News Initiative (2023), “More than 2,500 newspapers have closed since 2005. The country continues to lose newspapers at a rate of two per week.”

Convergence isn’t simply an analog-to-digital force. The forces of convergence reshaped the face of early digital media as well. With the exception of YouTube, most digital media experiences were limited to mainly text and some visuals. To illustrate this point, take a journey through the Facebook archives and you will see the transition for yourself. Facebook was simply evolving in reverse: it was converging to look more like older, more “traditional” media. Even YouTube looks much different today because of convergence. YouTube has evolved from a user-generated video content portal into its own destination for high-quality television programming that carries both libraries of television shows as well as live “event” fares. Even the Super Bowl can now be watched on YouTube!

We've come a long way. Today, those pioneering digital media brands can offer the same rich content experiences that used to be available only on televisions, radios, or in the printed pages of newspapers and magazines. The best content experience wins. It doesn't matter whether a media brand started as an "analog" brand or a "digital" brand. They all compete in the same space, and they all offer similar content experiences.

The force of convergence reshaped all three pillars of the media ecosystem—Consumers, Content, and Channels—in distinct but deeply interconnected ways. For consumers, convergence is now an expectation: they no longer care which screen they're using, only that the content works seamlessly, anytime, anywhere. If it doesn't, they'll move on. For content creators, convergence brought expanded reach but also higher stakes—content can no longer rely on the insulation of the channel or the convenience of limited choice. Attention must be earned. And for channels, convergence was existential. Channels now compete in a landscape where any form of insulation based upon function and form has collapsed.

Faced with an existential crisis, many channels responded by evolving into something more powerful: ecosystems. These weren't just pipelines for distributing content—they became integrated environments that combined content, data, personalization, and commerce into seamless, user-centered experiences. We've entered an era of Super Convergence, where platforms no longer serve a single function. You can watch, read, listen, shop, and chat all in one place. YouTube is now a music service and a video platform. Instagram blends messaging, media, and shopping. Amazon is a storefront, a video library, and a podcast host. The idea that "a screen is a screen is a screen" isn't theoretical—it's reality. But convergence no longer guarantees openness. In fact, new walls are going up. Platforms are reasserting control—locking content inside walled gardens, limiting interoperability, and making it harder to share across ecosystems. It's a defensive maneuver designed to protect economic value. We'll explore these rising walls in later chapters. For now, it's enough to recognize that while convergence remains a defining force, it's no longer frictionless.

Still, as a Global Truth, Convergence endures. It changed the physics of media—dissolving form, demanding quality, and empowering users to access content on their terms. That's not just a trend. That's a foundational shift.

Global Truth #2: Symbiosis

Symbiosis (n.): the living together in more or less intimate association or close union of two dissimilar organisms; a cooperative relationship. (Source: Merriam-Webster.com)

The force of Symbiosis has always been a part of media history. There is little evidence that one communication technology has ever completely destroyed another. Sure, individual media brands have come and gone, but audiences tend to mix the old with the new. According to Marshall McLuhan, when a new communication technology comes along, the old one may become obsolete, but it often finds a new role (McLuhan and McLuhan 1988). It all seems to fit.

Back in the Newtonian Media World, we didn't talk much about media working in symbiosis, even though the potential was always there. The prevailing logic was based on selection. The dominant media channel established the primary connection with the audience, while secondary channels were used to reach others. Because each channel had unique technologies and content formats, content was adapted to fit those forms. Stories might appear in multiple formats, but the same message was simply repackaged—not expanded—and there was little expectation that the same audience would engage with the story across multiple channels.

Toward the end of the Newtonian Era, a different form of storytelling emerged. Content creators began experimenting with transmedia storytelling—a format defined by Professor Henry Jenkins (2006) as narratives that unfold across multiple media platforms, with each channel contributing something new based on what it does best. Audiences were rewarded for traversing channels to experience a richer, more immersive story.

In his book *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins (2006) celebrates *The Matrix* as the first modern transmedia franchise. What began on the fringes of filmmaking and gaming quickly caught on across media. Shows like *Lost*, *Survivor*, *American Idol*, and *Heroes* adopted the approach. Journalists also took note—*The Guardian* created an award-winning campaign around “The Three Little Pigs” as a transmedia journalism experiment (*The Guardian* 2012). Savvy marketers caught on. P&G's *Old Spice: The Man Your Man Could Smell Like* was an early example of cross-platform storytelling designed to deepen audience engagement (Old Spice 2010).

As we moved through chaos, something extraordinary happened. The power to shape and expand media narratives shifted beyond traditional storytellers. Digital platforms gave rise to a new class of contributors—the creators. These weren't media professionals; they were everyday people and fans who built upon existing stories and extended narrative worlds in ways legacy gatekeepers never imagined. Jenkins (2006) described this shift as a shared act of storytelling, where world-building becomes a collaboration between content creators and audiences. In some cases, the most talented creators didn't just contribute to stories—they built entire ecosystems around themselves. These creators became media properties in their own right, helping to spark the rise of the creator economy (a topic we'll explore later in the book).

In the early days, transmedia storytelling was cumbersome. Audiences had to traverse entirely different platforms to piece together the full experience. Still, passionate fans embraced the challenge. These pioneering efforts were critical during the analog-digital transition. They allowed creators to experiment with digital formats while staying true to analog roots—and they helped bridge generational divides across media usage.

To support transmedia storytelling at scale, audiences needed a way to navigate. Enter the hashtag. What began as a grassroots Twitter tool soon became an organizing principle across platforms. Hashtags made stories searchable, shareable, and travelable. They offered continuity across fragmented experiences. Over time, recommendation engines and AI tools took over this function, helping audiences discover related content even without knowing what to look for. But it all began with the humble hashtag.

If you want to see how far we've come, just look at *Barbie*. In 2023, Warner Bros. and Mattel launched a film that became much more than a movie—it was a full-blown transmedia ecosystem. The story extended into fashion collaborations, music releases, immersive experiences, social commentary, and endless brand partnerships (Rubin 2023). But what made it truly symbiotic was the role of the audience. Fans became cocreators—remixing the soundtrack, stitching TikToks, building memes, and extending the narrative far beyond the original film. *Barbie* didn't just live on screen. It lived in closets, playlists, timelines, and feeds.

Symbiosis—the second Global Truth—is both an opportunity and a choice made by storytellers. And as we traveled through chaos, we noticed that some media companies expanded their storytelling to take advantage

of all the digital formats available to them. Others chose to maintain the singularity of their content, even as the channels around them evolved.

Can both forces coexist? Absolutely. We see it every day. A podcaster may create audio-only content but still use YouTube, Instagram, or TikTok to share snippets and build awareness. That same podcast might be featured in a magazine, on TV, or on social media. The narrative remains singular, but the ecosystem around it is deeply symbiotic. Even when not intentionally designed, transmedia storytelling often happens organically.

Symbiosis continues to reshape the 3Cs of the media ecosystem. Consumers are no longer passive recipients—they expect to engage, respond, and even co-create. Content is no longer tied to one channel—it travels, expands, and adapts. Channels, in turn, do more than just deliver content—they frame it, add meaning, and invite participation. In today's media world, the most successful media experiences don't just reach audiences—they invite them in. Symbiosis makes that possible.

Global Truth #3: Circuits

Circuit (n.): the route traveled, a two-way communication path between points, the complete path of an electric current, including usually the source of electric energy. (Source: Merriam-Webster.com)

Circuitry is a simple but powerful metaphor to describe how content flows across media channels from sender to receiver and back again. During the Newtonian Media Era, media circuits (the pathways by which content flowed from sender to receiver) worked like closed systems. Content flowed in a linear fashion from Point A to Point B with limited disruption. And each analog medium operated on its own circuit. Television content flowed across television circuits (known as broadcast channels), magazine content traveled along magazine circuits (single copy and subscription circulation), and so on. These circuits ran in parallel. There wasn't much mingling.

Who was responsible for turning circuits on or off? Content distribution and flow used to be in the hands of professionals in the media, journalism, and marketing industries. These gatekeepers comprised what was referred to as the formal cultural production system. The audience was the end point in the process—the Point B. And back when most media attracted “mass” audiences, the number on the receiving end was usually substantial.

We developed measurement protocols for each media circuit to determine the size and characteristics of the audience at any given time. This served as a proxy for “who” and “how many” people were exposed to a particular piece of content.

Back then, sharing was cumbersome. If you found a great recipe in a magazine, you might cut it out with scissors, photocopy it, and mail or hand it to someone else. Word of mouth worked in person, but it didn’t scale. Audiences may have always had the urge to share, but they lacked the frictionless circuits that would make it easy.

Digital technology changed the circuitry of media. Suddenly, the circuits were open. Content didn’t stay put. It started on one channel and seamlessly jumped onto another. Media thought-leader Rishad Tobaccowala referred to this phenomenon as “leaky” media. Others called it displacement. Regardless of the label, the result was the same: it became nearly impossible to contain great content. Once digitized, content became fluid—able to be lifted off one channel and placed onto another with minimal effort.

Social media didn’t create open circuits—but it did supercharge them. In the Newtonian era, even if you could lift content, you couldn’t easily place it back into the media stream. Social platforms changed that. They gave audiences a place to post and, more importantly, networks through which content could accelerate. Suddenly, anyone could share something across hundreds—or even millions—of followers. Consumers could amplify content at the speed of share.

How prolific was this channel-leaping? Just ask one famous woman: *Mona Lisa*. If someone asked you to name the media channel that delivers the *Mona Lisa* to the world, you’d probably answer, “the Louvre.” But that’s only part of the story. If you visited the Louvre today, you’d see hundreds of visitors in front of the iconic painting with their phones held high. One tap—and the *Mona Lisa* has entered a new media circuit, landing on Instagram, Snapchat, or TikTok. She may live in a museum, but she travels across digital networks by the millions.

During our travels through chaos, it was tempting to think of content circuits as one-way streets. A video, meme, or article lifts off one channel and speeds along a social platform into new spaces. But the reverse is also true. Just look at *The Daily Show’s* “Trump Twitter Library.” President Trump’s tweets—originally posted on social media—were lifted off Twitter and recirculated across television, newspapers, comedy monologues, and

even physical installations in New York City (Lang 2017). In an open circuit system, content flows in all directions: from mainstream media to social platforms and back again, creating feedback loops that cross formats, channels, and cultural spaces.

While digital technology opened the circuits, technology was only an accomplice to a much bigger phenomenon. The role of the audience suddenly shifted from recipient to accelerant. What do we mean by acceleration? Think about it. Audiences can act in real time, influencing hundreds, thousands, or even millions of people in their social networks. Word of mouth has existed for centuries. But with open circuits, audiences who are compelled to share what they experience can amplify the reach of any piece of content based on the size of their friends, followers, and email distribution lists. And those secondary audiences can do the same. It goes on and on—exponentially. Consumers have become the most potent media channel in the ecosystem. Frankly, they always were. But their ability to share in the Newtonian Era was far more limited. Today, armed with everyday technology, they accelerate great content to vast networks at the speed of share.

This new open circuitry wasn't all beneficial. It introduced a new set of problems. When content leaked off the originating channel, it became harder for the media company who invested in its creation to make money from it. Copyright lawsuits emerged. Companies attempted to reassert control over where and how far certain content could go.

Today's open circuits continue to reshape the 3Cs of media. Consumers have moved from being passive receivers to becoming powerful accelerants. Content is no longer designed just to be consumed—it's built to be shared, remixed, and reposted. And channels function less as end points and more as amplifiers that enable, shape, and monetize circulation. But while the spirit of open circuitry remains, there are growing constraints. Media companies are reasserting control through paywalls, platform restrictions, and monetization schemes. Circuits are still open—but only to the extent that they can generate revenue. The rise of Walled Gardens is an important theme we'll revisit in the chapters ahead.

Finally, open circuits were a great democratizing agent. You could launch great content in practically any medium. If it was truly worth sharing, it traveled at incredible speeds among well-established networks of hearts and minds. But open circuits also taught us an important lesson: content won't land anywhere—let alone everywhere—if it isn't worth sharing in the first

place. This created a renewed focus on the content product itself. Spoken from a true media professional: “Content was, is, and will remain king!”

Global Truth #4: Brands

Brand (n.): a class of goods identified by name as the product of a single firm or manufacturer. (Source: Merriam-Webster.com)

To understand why branding became one of the Five Global Truths guiding us through chaos, you need to know why brands are important in the first place. Brands differentiate products that are otherwise nearly identical in form and function and transform them into something special. They build trust and loyalty in a world oversaturated with choices by providing promises that fuel emotional connections with consumers. While brands still need to meet the functional needs of their product category, powerful brands compete on more than function. A powerful media brand should be able to rise above the chaos of transitioning media channels. It’s easier said than done!

Back in the Newtonian Media Era, media companies had an easier time building their businesses off the functional characteristics of their distribution channels. Media distribution pathways were relatively fixed and more proprietary. The technology was not particularly friendly to redundancy. There was only so much room on the broadcast spectrum. There were only so many poles and lines that could run down a street. And a print distribution network was costly and complicated to build.

As we left the Newtonian Media Era and as digital technology became available to any and all media, the functional characteristics of media began to blur together. The forces of convergence meant that distribution pathways were no longer proprietary. Once media content was digitized, it lost the safety of distribution silos suited for specific formats: broadcast, newsprint, glossy paper, cable conduit, and so on. Even what was once proprietary to a computer screen or mobile device faced the same competition from a host of legacy media that migrated into the digital media space. All digital content travels along the same digital highway. Any media enterprise that defined its strategy solely by its means of distribution ran into trouble. Suddenly, competition for the time and attention of audiences was coming from just about anywhere and everywhere.

Digital distribution further complicated matters, proving inexpensive and accessible to anyone. With \$10–\$20 to register a domain name and basic software like WordPress or Squarespace, anyone could enter the media business. We transitioned from a landscape of scarcity to one of abundance. There was more media than we knew what to do with!

Unfortunately, transmedia brands that could break through the confines of their distribution channels were few and far between. All too often, brands built their identities from their mode of distribution. The rise and fall of MTV is a prime example. In August 1981, MTV signed on with its famous “Video Killed the Radio Star” music video, revolutionizing the idea of music delivered on television. MTV became the media brand of an entire generation. Those of us who witnessed this phenomenon firsthand were labeled “The MTV Generation.” Over time, music migrated from television screens to digital screens. But MTV didn’t follow suit. It clung to its identity as a cable television network, ceding the digital music space to the likes of Sony, Apple, and others. Today, MTV is a mere shadow of its former self.

The MTV story isn’t unique. Consider CNN. It’s hard to establish an identity beyond cable news when your name, “Cable News Network,” ties you to the channel. HBO started the same way—as Home Box Office.

But there were glimmers of hope. Take ESPN. When ESPN first entered the picture in 1979, the idea of a cable network fully dedicated to sports was provocative. But ESPN understood that cable distribution was not the story. At the time, sports coverage was accessible on various channels: television, radio, newspapers, and the like. But ESPN was different. It built a brand on the idea that it would not simply distribute sports content over a cable conduit; rather, it would serve sports fans.

ESPN’s mission, “To serve sports fans wherever sports are watched, listened to, discussed, debated, read about, or played,” shapes everything it does. This commitment infuses a unique personality into ESPN’s content, enabling it to meet sports fans where they are. As long as ESPN delivers its promise to sports fans, the brand can transcend any channel.

Has ESPN faced challenges from its primary distribution channel? Absolutely. It grapples with the financial strain of competing in a new digital landscape shaped by convergence. Yet, a weaker brand would have collapsed. ESPN continues to navigate emerging channels serving sports fans. While its financials may not be perfect, the opportunity remains.

Ironically, even as new digital media companies came onto the scene, many of them made the same mistake. Take Netflix, for instance. Its name

implies movie access over the internet, tying the company to a specific distribution mode. The branding worked well for a time, but as Netflix evolved into a producer, distributor, and cultural force, it outgrew its own label. Even the most innovative players can fall into old patterns.

So what we have here isn't an explanatory truth as much as a cautionary one. Convergence will take away the distinction between channels. Branding is necessary to survive. We've seen this in many other industries where brands saved products from becoming commodities. It's time for media to catch on—or fall victim to sameness.

That said, we're seeing some shiny examples: one old, and one new. The New York Times has become a destination brand for trusted, in-depth reporting, multimedia storytelling, and even lifestyle products. Others, like NPR (National Public Radio) or National Geographic, quietly evolved into multi-format experiences without abandoning their editorial DNA. These brands succeeded not because of their technology—but because of their clarity of purpose.

And then there's Google. Despite the real threats it faces—from antitrust litigation to increased regulatory scrutiny—Google has built something few other tech companies have: an enduring place in the hearts and minds of its users. Google doesn't just functionally provide information access; rather, the brand is built on the promise of “organizing the world's information and making it universally accessible and useful” (Google n.d.). That brand promise transcends product features, screen formats, and even business models.

Why does it matter for us to get this right? Let's consider the 3Cs. In today's ecosystem of content overload and digital clutter, the brand isn't just a logo—it's a trustmark. In a search-driven environment, where the same news story might appear across dozens of indistinguishable sites, consumers instinctively gravitate toward the brand they trust most. That's more important than ever in an era when content itself can become commoditized. Branding isn't fluff. It's navigation. And only a transmedia brand—one that delivers on its promise across any channel, regardless of form or function—will be able to follow the future trajectory of evolving media. The rest will be left behind, their relevance fading as fast as the channels they were built upon. For content creators, a strong brand gives shape and direction to the stories they produce. And for channels, branding becomes a way to frame experience beyond functionality. As

the distinctions between delivery systems dissolve, brand becomes the anchor.

Currently, the media ecosystem would barely earn a passing grade. As we traveled through chaos, we found a landscape littered with technology companies that didn't move beyond their functional product offerings toward something more permanent and meaningful in their customers' lives. Remember Myspace? Vine videos? AOL, anyone? The list goes on. All those once shiny objects are now nothing more than discarded litter alongside the vast superhighway. It's time we got this fundamental truth right.

Global Truth #5: Economics

Economics (n.): a social science concerned chiefly with description and analysis of the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services. (Source: Merriam-Webster.com)

In the end, it all comes down to money. The media business is primarily a for-profit enterprise—and nothing is sustainable if given away for free. As technology consultant Shelly Palmer (2022) succinctly put it: “I pay, you pay, or someone else pays.” While his phrasing was simple, it reflects a much larger truth about media economics: value must come from each of the three Cs—Content, Consumers, and Channels. Some content is valuable enough that consumers will pay directly for it, like a movie rental or a digital download. Other content, such as the user-generated stories that populate your social feed, may not be something consumers will pay for—but advertisers will, in order to reach those audiences. And channels themselves can generate revenue by offering subscriptions that unlock access to a full library of content. In practice, most media models blend these revenue sources into a web of value creation.

During the Newtonian Media Era, economic models were relatively stable. Broadcast television and radio were free to the audience and advertiser-supported. Print media charged both subscribers and advertisers. Cable bundled dozens of channels into a single fee, with some premium networks operating ad free. The business models were distinct, consistent, and predictable.

Then came digital. In the early days of the internet, the economic model resembled broadcast: content was free to audiences and supported (or at

least supplemented) by advertising. But unlike broadcast, advertisers were slow to follow. Media companies gave away digital ads as “added value” for legacy buys or adopted direct-response pricing models like cost per click (CPC). This undervalued system generated only a fraction of legacy revenue, leading media executive Jeff Zucker (2008) to lament, “We traded analog dollars for digital pennies.”

This might help explain why professional content producers were slow to move their content off analog channels and onto digital platforms. If you were making money from traditional advertising revenue, you couldn’t afford to accept digital pennies. And since the audience wasn’t paying, you couldn’t make up the difference. It was a lose-lose proposition.

So what happened instead? We had all this excess digital channel capacity without enough high-quality content to fill it. Enter the Creator. These new digital-native producers posted user-generated content directly onto digital platforms, often earning money through revenue-sharing models tied to digital ads. Creators had less overhead and could survive on smaller margins. The economics worked—at least for a while.

But the dominant model in the early days of digital—direct-response advertising—had a dark side. It incentivized quantity over quality, giving rise to clickbait and MFA (made for advertising) sites. These farms flooded the internet with exaggerated or misleading content, prioritizing clicks over truth and degrading public trust. The content itself became a casualty of the economic model that prioritized immediate interaction over meaningful engagement.

Eventually, pioneers stepped in to challenge the status quo. Netflix and The New York Times rejected the assumption that digital content must be free and solely ad-supported. Netflix launched its streaming platform in 2007 with an ad-free subscription model that proved audiences would pay for quality. It took fifteen years, but eventually Netflix introduced an ad-supported tier in 2022. Consumers now have a choice: pay a lower subscription fee and watch with ads, or pay more for an ad-free experience. The time was right for advertising-supported subscription tier because unlike the early “digital pennies” advertising days, Netflix could now command high CPMs (cost per 1,000 audience impressions served)—comparable to those of television—reflecting the value advertisers place on Netflix’s high-quality, brand-safe content.

The New York Times introduced its paywall back in 2011, creating a sustainable revenue stream from readers without abandoning advertisers

altogether. This hybrid model preserved traditional strengths while adapting to a digital world. Over time, The Times expanded beyond journalism into cooking, games, wellness, and audio—diversifying its value and proving that media companies could both broaden and deepen their relationships with consumers in the digital terrain and become profitable while at it.

While these two pioneers demonstrated the new economic potential of digital media, not all is well across the board. Today, we're seeing growing tension among competing economic models. Subscription fatigue is real, as consumers grow overwhelmed by the number of services vying for a slice of their wallet. At the same time, ad-supported models face the challenge of increasing clutter and waning attention. Many consumers are rethinking how much content they truly need—and how much they're willing to pay. They churn in and out of services, bundle content with other purchases, or opt for lower-cost, ad-supported options. In response, media companies are forced to experiment with a mix of hybrid access, tiered pricing, and cross-subsidization in search of economic stability. Not all are successful (Malthouse et al. 2024).

The moral of the story? Without a viable economic model, nothing else matters. The media industry can't build for the future if it doesn't know how to fund it. And while the first wave of digital disruption is behind us, the next wave of economic pressure is just beginning. In the chapters ahead, we'll explore how media economics are increasingly influenced by other business models—particularly commerce. These hybrid models are reshaping how content is monetized and valued across platforms, and we'll cover this extensively in the coming chapters of the book.

Regardless of its source, the truth remains: economic vitality is essential to the future of the media industry, solidifying it as one of the Five Global Truths.

Using All Five Global Truths to Explain Modern Media

Each of the truths on their own or in combination with the others explained how the Newtonian Media World broke down and how we've arrived at our current state. While our story isn't over, the part of the story that deals with the transition to a digital media world is complete. And the Five

Global Truths got us here. Albert Einstein is often credited with saying, “If you can’t explain it simply, you don’t understand it well enough.” Here’s a simple explanation using the Five Global Truths to explain the digital media world as it exists today:

Media are no longer confined to a specific channel. Today, any media company can set up shop on any digital channel available. While media companies can choose to focus on a single mode of delivery, it’s not a necessity, it’s a choice. And those same media companies can now tell transmedia stories to take advantage of how individual media build upon and complement each other. With the right form of storytelling, audiences are rewarded for crossing channels to immerse themselves in a story, and each channel can contribute based on its strengths. If media companies create content worth sharing, the open circuitry of the digital media landscape enables consumers to accelerate that content across vast networks at the speed of share. Moreover, media companies that understand branding can capitalize on these changes, traveling to where consumers want to go and where existing and emerging channels will take them. Those stuck in a particular mode of distribution will likely struggle. No sector of this new media landscape is immune to economic challenges. The economics of the mass media era are behind us, and the new economics require a focus on earning a fair return on all three components of the media equation—Content, Channels, and Consumers.