Emerging Industry Issues and Trends Influencing the Branding of Media Content

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Abstract

Rarely can one media firm possess a piece of equipment, computer software, organizational structure, business model or distribution platform that cannot be copied by rivals. On the other hand, exclusive and legally protected branded *content* is far more likely to offer a genuine competitive advantage. This chapter looks at emerging trends and issues influencing the branding of media content from an industry perspective. Using the overlapping lenses of technology, economics and regulation, the chapter consolidates hundreds of contemporary industry trade articles published in the U.S into a parsimonious "literature review" of basic themes. The work concludes with a recommendation that academics routinely study industry trade articles as a means to keep their research and teaching agendas relevant to the real world of media brand management.

Keywords

News brands • Multiple platforms • Business models • Streaming services • Audience behaviour

1 Industry Issues and Trends Influencing the Branding of Media Content

To withstand the daily barrage of audience choices, media brands today are challenged to generate extraordinary content that will exploit new technologies, defy imitation, thwart competition, promote audience loyalty, attract advertisers, renew subscribers, deserve copyright protection and at the end of the day, make

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money! Addressing these challenges and recognizing that too often academic researchers lose touch with real-world media practitioners, this chapter looks at emerging issues and trends influencing the branding of media content from an industry perspective.

Of all the assets a media firm may possess, rarely can it boast a piece of equipment, computer software, organizational structure, business model or distribution platform that cannot be copied readily by rivals. Conversely unique *content*, possessing an easily recognized and highly respected brand name, is far more likely to be immune from competitive attack. This chapter consolidates hundreds of contemporary industry trade articles published in the U.S into a "literature review" covering for the most part 7 months (October 2013–April 2014) with a few exceptions. No doubt the issues and trends revealed in this chapter will be displaced quickly by new industry challenges and therefore a more enduring goal of this chapter was to demonstrate how this glut of information can be curated into a parsimonious grouping of useful themes. This informal processing is similar to a qualitative content analysis in that the author conducted "a data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meaning" (Patton, 2002, p. 453) without necessarily counting incidences.

For this endeavor the term *content* refers to professionally created media products distributed to audiences with the goal to make money through various business models, most notably advertising and subscription. Article references offer specific periodical examples taken from a much larger database. Many referenced articles do not explicitly use the term *brand*, but they still are noted because of their implied brand-related topics.

1.1 Coping with Convergence

A recent trade publication headline asserts "Content, Under Pressure: Production and Distribution Continue to Converge" and indeed the notion of media convergence is never far away from conversations among media professionals (Holloway, 2014). Digital technology has been the primary catalyst for generating an unprecedented amount of media content that is available to audiences anywhere, anytime, via any platform displayed on any device. Inexorably the partitions separating one medium from another are disappearing quickly. Today content providers must be "platform agnostic" and focus on ways to take advantage of this convergence (Woodrooffe & Levy, 2012). One innovative example is the recognition that the computer tablet increasingly has become the 'first screen' for many pre-school-age viewers. As a response, *Walt Disney* has made the initial nine episodes of an upcoming prominent kids' series "Sheriff Callie's Wild West" available on mobile devices *first*, before distributing it to cable outlets (Barnes, 2013).

Content itself may be influenced by the platform selected. A research executive states that "The average web user today accesses the internet on multiple platforms and has different *value drivers* for each platform and access method" (Goodman, 2013). That is, the identical content may not be appreciated in the same manner across all platforms. In particular content providers are paying close attention to how audiences make use of small 7- to 10-in. tablets and 4-to 6-in. smartphones. For example one article proclaims that "...the entire creative world is now focusing on delivery of short-form content for an audience. Every pundit in mobile is examining how long someone will actually watch content on mobile devices" (Krechman, 2013). The challenge is to somehow accommodate the technology without losing the brand. A few years ago BBC television executive Rosie Allimonos anticipated the onrush of multiple platforms and warned that "If you're going to extend a show in any way, you have to figure out (first) what its DNA is, what its essence is as a brand. Then you can carry that over to different platforms and decide if there is anything new to be added to the mix." (Levy, 2011).

1.2 More Streaming Opportunities Change Audience Behavior

Considerable press coverage has been focused on video and audio Internet-based *streaming*, offering serious competition to cable and satellite pay TV services. Dozens of start-up streaming companies are expected to join established services, such as *Netflix, Hulu, You Tube* and *Pandora*, in exploiting this relatively new distribution tool (Cohan, 2013). One industry journalists asserts "With its new array of online options for viewing media—not to mention the increasing amount of original content created for online audiences—the internet has become a disruptive influence on the traditional television business, plain and simple" (McMillan, 2013).

The physical and social environment for experiencing streamed content is changing rapidly with the introduction of big-screen, high definition (HD) "smart TVs." These devices encourage audiences to break away from small-screen computers, typically ensconced in dens or bedrooms, and move to larger *family rooms* that foster group interactions associated more often with conventional TV/cable viewing (Friedman, 2014; Wang, 2013). Branding professionals cannot ignore this transformation in audience behavior. Streamed content is no longer handicapped by screen size.

1.3 Increased Time-Shifted Viewing and Birth of the Binge

When 7-day, time-shifted data are added to "live" TV ratings, some programs nearly double their audience size. One media observer has proclaimed that "This is clearly shaping up as the season of the DVR" (Fitzgerald, 2013). In addition, major broadcast and cable networks now make old episodes of prime-time programming available on-demand through several distribution technologies, including cable and Internet streaming. Audiences are taking advantage of time-shifting opportunities to experience program content at their convenience. The time-honored strategies of program scheduling (e.g. lead in, tent poling, stripping and counter programming) are fading away quickly. This means that to attract audiences programs today must rely more on their stand-alone audience brand equity and less on clever scheduling.

Time-shifting also has stimulated an audience-viewing phenomenon called *binge viewing* in which individuals watch dozens of archived episodes of one program in one sitting. Online streaming firms are credited with inventing the “binge-a-thon”, particularly *Netflix,* which typically offers all episodes of its newly created original series, such as “*House of Cards*”, for a nominal fee (Adalian, 2013). Media branding researchers need to investigate whether time-shifted over-indulgence of content can hurt the long-term attraction and equity of the brand.

Another burning question is how can advertising-based content providers make money from these stored program inventories? One article headline states “Comcast Tests New Ad Tech to Help Networks Capture Binge Viewers” and indeed the firm is testing new technology that will insert up-to-date commercials into past episodes of TV shows (Faughnder, 2013).

1.4 Print Media Increase Video Content

Conventional print media continue to introduce moving video into their website presentations. From *Rolling Stone* and *People Magazine* to *The New York Times* and *Forbes*, these media brands are integrating videos within text articles (Cohan, 2013). According to one media consultant, print media are doing this “because they are at a point in their business where they are trying to figure out how to extend their brand and content onto every platform. They understand that this is a must for survival” (Sokoloff, 2013). In an effort to engage its loyal readers, *Cosmopolitan* magazine has gone a step further by introducing live streamed video of its weekly editorial pitch meeting, where “Online audiences are invited to spend almost an hour on a Tuesday afternoon watching editors awkwardly giggle while kicking around story ideas in a conference room” (Bloomington, 2013). As long-standing print media brands become more video oriented, brand managers need to be careful not to violate their brands’ consumer-based equity, which may be rooted in the written word and credible journalism.

1.5 The “Second Screen” and Social Media

Among the most talked about topics among industry publications is the “second screen” use of social media, such as *Twitter* and *Facebook,* to engage TV audiences. Simultaneously interacting with more than one item of media content comes under the rubric of *media multitasking*, which typically involves audiences using laptops, tablets or smart phones while watching television. For example, researchers have found nearly 100 million tweets per month related to TV programming (often associated with binge viewing), all generated within 3 hours of each telecast, if not during the telecast itself (Hughes, 2013). Obviously astute brand managers should capitalize on this second screen audience interaction. From a brand monetizing perspective, an advertising agency executive observes that "*Twitter* has spent much of the past year touting its symbiotic relationship with TV, promoting its ability to harness data and insights for advertisers to reach those viewers" (Sloan, 2014).

1.6 Research Drives Content Decision Making

A major movie producer states that "People are interested in a smarter, more accurate way to decide what to make and at what level.... Studios are all about the numbers. Instead of throwing money at a film or an actor and hoping for the best, there is a better, more analytic way to determine beforehand if a film (or TV show) is worth making, and at what specific dollar value" (Donahue, 2013). Now more than ever quantitative audience research drives content decision making, which in turn influences brand marketing strategies. A research buzzword found in many industry publications is "Big Data", referring to the acquisition of massive amounts of audience information that requires highly sophisticated database software tools. (Mandese, 2014a). This "ultra-granular" audience information enables companies to deliver specialized content and advertising messages to individuals based on what they've bought, what they've browsed, what they've clicked on in an email, what they've shared on *Facebook*, and so on. For example, *Netflix* uses the data collected from the viewing habits of its users to help recommend new movies and also to craft original television series (Weiss, 2014). As audience research techniques become ever-more sophisticated, content creators and distributors need to have their brands responsive to this newly acquired knowledge.

Although much content is now available on multiple distribution platforms, advertisers are reluctant to allocate significant budgets to these non-conventional "screens" because of a lack of reliable audience data. One insightful headline reads "Marketers Eager to Spend on Multiple Screens but Want Better Cross-Screen Metrics (Whitney, 2013). This is more of a business-to-business branding challenge.

1.7 Continued Consolidation of Media Ownership

As competition becomes more intense within a marketplace, a kind of natural selection occurs favoring the large synergistic organizations that can share resources and cross promote a family of niche brands. A media analyst notes that "Despite the hyper-fragmentation of the media marketplace, five suppliers still represent a critical mass of Madison Avenue's media-buying power." In particular, *Comcast, Disney, CBS, Time Warner* and *Google* control almost half of all national advertising revenue in the U.S. (Mandese, 2014b).

On a smaller local scale television station ownership has experienced unprecedented disruption in recent years with hundreds of stations being acquired by big group owners. For example, *The Tribune Company* recently agreed to pay $2.7

billion for 19 local stations, making it one of the largest groups of local affiliates in the United States (Stelter & Haughney, 2013). Whether examining media conglomerates or broadcast station group owners, the top-down “parent” or “portfolio” brand can influence dramatically the content creation and distribution of subsidiary brands.

This ongoing consolidation of media ownership in which the big get even bigger runs contrary to the new-age economic theory of the long tail, which foresees a golden era in which small-scale creative talent flourishes as never before. Digital technology supposedly has made music, books, movies and many other goods economically viable on a much smaller scale but reality has come crashing in on many new small enterprises. Research shows that relying on blockbuster hits and best sellers—popular brands—remains the most viable means for making profits. The reason? A professor of economics speculates that “today’s tighter schedules have made people more reluctant to sift through the growing avalanche of options confronting them. Many consumers sidestep this unpleasantness by focusing on only the most popular entries” (Frank, 2014).

1.8 In Search of Viable Business Models

Either directly or indirectly, many articles addressed the nagging problem of making money or “monetizing” content through various Internet-based business models. For instance, *Facebook* has introduced a new ad video format that plays automatically when users check their news feeds (Lafayette, 2013). Advertising on the Internet has become more intrusive with some media critics complaining about ad clutter, such as “All Those Commercials on HuluPlus” (Martin, 2013).

Meanwhile thousands of media entrepreneurs have flooded the internet with content using *You Tube* owned by *Google*. These content producers permit *Google* to sell advertising that will appear on their sites in return for a hefty 45 % share of the revenue. The only problem according to one analyst is that “YouTube is uploading video content so quickly it can’t sell enough ads to fill all the potential commercial slots” (Kaufman, 2014). Although a few content makers have gotten rich using *You Tube*, the vast majority have experienced disillusionment with the promise of long tail economics. As mentioned earlier, overabundance of choice ironically can become curse for small entrepreneurs that cannot push their brands into the marketing spotlight.

Audiences are expressing another kind of disillusionment with a business model by “cutting the cord” with their current Pay TV content services. Thousands of U.S households are cancelling subscriptions with cable, satellite and telco video providers and opting for less-expensive “Over the Top” streamed video content (Diallo, 2013). Underlying this abandonment is the fact that despite the hundreds of channels available, the typical U.S household watches regularly only about a dozen. Media branding professionals must remember that mere channel capacity does not assure adequate audience attraction to all channels.

1.9 News Brands Struggle to Survive

News brands in particular continue to struggle with obsolete business models, suffering dramatic losses in both subscriber and advertiser revenues. The sad result has been cutbacks, layoffs, buyouts and bankruptcies (Kohut, 2013). To offset diminishing advertising dollars, some well-established newspaper services are experimenting with a hybrid or "freemium" online business model in which a limited number of news items are offered free but eventually the website visitor will encounter a threshold or "pay wall" requiring a subscription or short-term usage fee (Gillette, 2013). Naturally, strong brands can make this idea work more effectively than lesser brands can. Audiences are reluctant to pay a premium price for "generic" news and information that can be acquired elsewhere for free. That is, in order to make money the branded news source must offer exceptional value.

Another problem facing news organizations is the influence of social media on the ways news content is gathered, disseminated and consumed. A media analyst explains that instead of professional journalists doing all the work, "News can be broken on *Twitter* by the participants in, or observers of a particular event. The journalist often becomes an interpreter, reacting to events..." (Jewel, 2013). Competing social media, such as *Facebook*, are now becoming "more Twitter like" in providing audience-generated news coverage (Delo, 2013).

At first user-generated content seemed like a great idea for engaging audiences and cultivating loyalty but there is a downside to all this audience participation, especially for news organizations. Exchanges among audience members must be controlled or "moderated" diligently by the website host. One media consultant cautions that "Unmoderated comments that contain insults, libelous claims, swear words and similar content will create a bad impression with well-behaved visitors and damage the site's brand and image." (Bateman, 2013).

1.10 "Native Advertising" Invades Media Content

For decades most respected media organizations maintained a management firewall between news content and advertising, but revenue problems have caused this wall to be breached (see Matteo & Zotto, 2015). Today many news organizations are succumbing to the controversial practice of "native advertising" which, for a price, allows advertisers to introduce their own long-form story content with subtly embed marketing messages. Prominent news brands, such *as Forbes, New York Times* and *MSNBC*, have entered this domain (O'Malley, 2014). The core issue is whether audiences truly recognize that a paid-for section of a publication or newscast is perceived as separate and distinct from surrounding content (Sass, 2013). Branding professionals should be concerned about possible effects of native advertising on the perceived credibility of a news brand. As one industry critic states "Billions of banner ad impressions may annoy readers, but they don't misdirect users by disguising the source of the message—and this is exactly what native does. If publishers and marketers aren't careful, they are going to poison the well of digital ad communications by breaking consumer trust" (Tso, 2013). And trust is at the core of any successful brand.

1.11 The Growth of Original Program Content on Cable and Online

Cable is losing its long-standing imagery as a place for old broadcast network reruns and is investing millions of dollars in creating original content not seen elsewhere. With 180 scripted original series scheduled for the 2014 season, an industry observer claims that "More important than numbers is the perception that cable is the place to turn for quality. It started with "*The Sopranos*," and continues with awards and critical attention showered on the likes of "*Mad Men*," "*Homeland*" and "*Breaking Bad*" The idea is reinforced when many of television's key creative minds argue that cable is the place to be" (Bayer, 2014). Of course original series are high risk ventures. Unlike established successful rerun brands, new unfamiliar branded content requires far more brand marketing effort and investment. An industry article states that "As *A&E* has made the push into running only original programming during primetime, its branding has naturally followed suit. A new tagline, 'Be Original' served as a literal proclamation of the new outlook" (Sanders, 2014).

Also, broadcast and cable are not the only sources of original content these days. For example, *Amazon*, which earned its brand equity from selling books and other retailed items, is now exploring original content pilots for its lesser-known streaming service (Baysinger, 2013). An intriguing question is can the *Amazon* brand be extended to just about anything?

1.12 Widening the Content Niche

A growing branding strategy intended to attract larger audiences is to widen the content niche. An example is the impressive audience growth of *The History Channel*, which seldom emphasizes conventional history topics, but instead, has stretched the brand to include hit programs, such as "*American Pickers*" and "*Pawn Stars*." The network's contrived slogan is now "making history every day." The widening of a niche, however, can jeopardize the perceived uniqueness of a brand by blurring its image. An audience researcher complains "How do you differentiate a cable brand? Viewers never know what to expect or which network they're watching. They all look the same and stand for nothing. 'Rebranding'. . . ends up being short on substance and big on window dressing" (Gunelius, 2013).

1.13 Protecting Branded Content Keeps Getting Harder

Converged multi-platform distribution of content creates nagging legal issues concerning copyright protection. Never before has there been such widespread and immediate access to such a broad array of creative content and never before has it been so easy to illegally copy and distribute multiple perfect copies of content to audiences. Are the laws keeping pace with technology? Greg Walden, Chairman of the House Communications and Technology Subcommittee bemoans "In the on-demand world of the Internet and mobility, the statutes that govern the video marketplace are blissfully ignorant of the changes that have taken place around them (Johnson, 2013).

Aside from Internet and mobility issues another problem garnering headlines for months has been broadcast retransmission consent for cable operators. In simple terms television broadcasters want to be paid by cable operators for the "retransmission" of program content to subscribers. Although the federal law covering retransmission consent was passed in 1992, cable companies didn't pay such fees and local stations didn't seriously begin demanding them until recently. The battle over these fees has sometimes gotten so heated that TV stations have been blacked out on local cable for lack of a consent deal (Friedman, 2013). From a branding point of view this controversy underscores the importance of protecting content through copyright and licensing.

2 Conclusion

In an overcrowded media marketplace, the best way to nurture a sustainable competitive advantage over rivals is to provide audiences with extraordinary branded *content*. This task is easier said than done and the best means of appreciating the ongoing efforts is to regularly scrutinize industry trade periodicals.

Realizing that this chapter is merely a perishable snapshot of ongoing topics, scholars need to keep abreast of the weekly tidal wave of industry activities. One way to prevent drowning is to employ techniques similar to those used in more formal qualitative content analyses. This "data reduction" at first may seem burdensome and time consuming but eventually, as the reader becomes more familiar and comfortable with the exercise, the processing accelerates and becomes almost effortless. And just as routine physical exercise often becomes a pleasurable experience, so "reading the trades" can become entertaining as well as enlightening.

Over time recurring themes typically will emerge and many scholars save pertinent articles electronically, filing them under ongoing themes or creating new themes when appropriate. From a teaching perspective, real-world case studies mirroring lecture or text topics can enhance the classroom experience for students. From a research perspective, a collection of similar articles can identify fresh topics for academic study.

Finally, routinely analyzing industry trade articles in a systematic way should encourage inter-disciplinary teaching and research opportunities. No single professor has a total grasp on all the intertwined technological, economic and regulatory aspects of media brand management; so let us tear down the artificial walls separating academic departments and *converge our thinking*!

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