



What's new about new media? How multi-channel networks work with content creators

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Abstract With the rise and rapid proliferation of digital and online marketing, increased cord-cutting by consumers, and new content being created online, Internet-based advertising is the single fastest-growing ad expenditure category, outstripping TV, radio, and other more traditional media formats. With the rise of new media and the increased content creation, the ability of content creators to manage and guide their brand has become more important than ever. This article investigates one such mechanism for managing the new media phenomenon, the Multi-Channel Network (MCN) model. An MCN is any entity or organization which either partners with content creators or directly produces a variety of distinctive content and works to perform business and marketing functions on the platform in which said content is released. This article investigates the MCN phenomena as it specifically addresses the needs of content creators in the new presumptive consumer culture that helps inform and create new media content. It highlights strategies for managing and navigating the new media and MCN domain.

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1. The multi-channel network

It is a good time to be a new media entrepreneur, as the talent behind Nerdist Industries will attest. What began as a single podcast has grown into a small empire that includes a YouTube channel, a

network of podcasts, and even a TV show produced and aired by BBC America. The Nerdist represents a brand new way of looking at media and entertainment content—a system where the audience and consumer are as integral to the success of a brand as the content itself.

With the rise and rapid proliferation of digital and online marketing since the mid-1990s, Internet-based advertising is the single fastest-growing ad expenditure category, outstripping TV, radio, and other more traditional media formats (IAB/PwC, 2014). Along

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with Web 2.0 and the concept of new media, the Internet has entered a period of what has been referred to as a ‘participatory culture,’ where the new media output is created alongside and often in collaboration with the viewers of that output. Many diverse creators of content and the consumers of that content have come together to form a new system of media consumption. As Adam Rymer, president of Nerdist Industries put it, “It feels like the evolution of television, the evolution of media” (Castillo, 2014).

Content creators have a very intimate connection with their audiences—especially with the millennial generation, which has grown up with the Internet and intuitively understands digital distribution and the value it holds. These brand relationships are capitalized on both as part of the community and with individual consumers (Christodoulides, 2009; Simmons, 2008). By capitalizing on this intimacy, content creators—and by extension, the brands they develop—can create value for audiences by providing them with a type of content that is more trustworthy, genuine, and timely than that of traditional media. At the same time, these creators are showing that they have a level of referent power over large, definable markets—something that is very attractive to advertisers.

In addition to a new system of media consumption, new business models and methods of monetizing content on the Internet have formed as well. This article will examine one such business model—the multi-channel network (MCN)—and assess its uses, structure, and revenue-generating capabilities and the wider implications it has on new media forms and the creators who make their livelihood in new media. We will give some recommendations to content creators and marketing professionals on facets of MCNs and what they should consider when evaluating joining or creating an MCN. We specifically address what the MCN can do for content creators, focusing on its role in navigating legal and ethical challenges, building audiences, and implementing other business structures, allowing content creators to do what they do best: create.

1.1. What are MCNs?

The term *multi-channel network* was first coined by YouTube, the platform used by the great majority of these networks. An MCN is any entity or organization that partners with content creators or directly produces a variety of distinctive content and works to perform business and marketing functions via the platform whereby said content is released. An MCN’s repertoire can include self-created content and

management, broad studio-created content, or even hubs or portals for created content. Content creators, or online personalities, generally join an MCN in order to gain audiences, cross promote, develop branding strategies, connect with ‘mainstream’ money and content, and utilize digital rights management and other legal services.

Effectively, any entity that produces a wide variety of encapsulated content or otherwise serves as a hub for those who create content can be considered an MCN. This can go beyond simply creating a lot of shows or varying the content they create and can include providing news, blogs, or audio content. A good example of a single company that produces content in the vein of an MCN is *Monocle* (2015), a magazine and 24-hour online radio station that provides content “on global affairs, business, culture, design and much more.” As a part of the larger Monocle media brand, the online radio station (and podcasts of the station’s content) functions as a network of individual shows that each have their own style, content, contributors, and editors and all operate underneath one brand umbrella.

2. Advantages of the MCN

2.1. Audience, collaboration, and branding

MCNs provide a framework for what has long been considered an amateur, unstructured, and mysterious medium. YouTube is filled with everyday users who post vlogs, skits, video edits, and, of course, cat videos. If they attract an audience, these content creators begin to create a social network around themselves that can spill outside of YouTube and into other forms of online and offline interaction. One example of such a community is the Nerdfighters. Inspired by John and Hank Green’s (a.k.a., the ‘Vlogbrothers’) content and message, Nerdfighters are “a community that sprung up around our videos, and basically we just get together and try to do awesome things and have a good time and fight against world-suck” (Green & Green, 2009). The community grew and eventually developed into a very loose organization existing in libraries, high schools, and college campuses all over the world. This community goes beyond sharing a love of nerdy things. Chapters of the group are involved in charitable work, artistic endeavors, and fighting against bullying. The audience, these Nerdfighters, pushed the work of one of the Vlogbrothers’ collaborators, John Green, into the mainstream, resulting in the creation of the hit movies *The Fault in Our Stars* and *Paper Towns*.

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