

*What's in a Name? Making Sense of Innovation and Practice*  
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With synergy allegedly defunct, the television industry has embraced new buzz words to describe content leveraged and repackaged across media boundaries: content streaming, digital extension, multiplatforming, and so on. Even the more theoretical notion of transmedia has gained traction as *Convergence Culture* makes the rounds in executive and creative circles. Media historians, however, must not automatically adopt industrial discourse in turn, asking instead whether such neologisms actually describe new and different things. Franchising also circulates widely as another means of organizing and understanding content systems in contemporary television, yet this particular way of framing cultural production has a longer history, with even consumers recognizing older television programs like *Star Trek* and *Law & Order* as “franchises.” By no means does this prove franchising is the “right” umbrella descriptor for what the industry has been doing. Historians must see these competing ideas as a trajectory of content organization across markets, and importantly, of trying to make sense of those practices. Unsure how to negotiate major industrial shifts, but claiming expertise in managing market uncertainty, executives behind these terms might find it easier to repackage existing strategies than to develop new ones.

Yet the pressing need to adapt also leads to borrowed strategies, and renaming can disguise how dominant players appropriate prior innovations from the industrial margins. Networks appear cutting edge when expanding contemporary “multiplatform” brands like *CSI*, *Grey's Anatomy* and *The Office*, but they adopt practices developed earlier by relative independents. Though lacking technology to do so digitally, first-run syndicators can be credited with adapting developing non-network (and often non-prime time) television properties like *Star Trek* and *Transformers* into ongoing franchises in the 1980s (and while the term “franchise” may have been newish, such transmedia content organization was by no means unprecedented). Furthermore, the prior peripheral emergence of strategies pursued widely today forces historians to consider that the history of television franchising (or whatever!) has been frequently shaped by forces *outside* television proper. As the comic book industry began shrinking precipitously in the 1970s, companies like Marvel Comics looked to television as a solution, creating an animation division, Marvel Productions, to move its established library of characters into a more lucrative market. Thus, from the needs of the comic book industry came *Spider-Man* and *X-Men* series in the 1980s and 90s that in turn drove video game and action figure products. Similarly, toymakers Hasbro and Mattel significantly reshaped 1980s children's television to be a site of cross-market franchising, supporting an external toy market by contracting with Filmation and Marvel animators to produce toy-based series like *Transformers*, *GI Joe*, and *He-Man*.

Whether dubbed multiplatforming, franchising, or transmediation, the “unboxing” of television content has been in progress for some time. While forces outside of television helped to open the box, today's networks keep it open, similarly looking outward to meet inward market needs. The fact that this ongoing process goes by so many names demonstrates the unevenness with which industry giants, independents, and even academics have historically valued and made sense of it.