

Unboxing TV
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It's Not (Just) About Television, and It Never Was: Historical Perspectives on Media Convergence

I'd like to consider the relationship between epochal change and the incremental transformations that often begin at the edges of the television industry.

The farther we get from the center of the medium formally and industrially, the more porous become the technological, economic, and cultural boundaries that separate it from other media. The kinds of programs that we now think of as definitive of a particular era (whether a live anthology drama like *Marty*, a classic network era filmed series like *Bonanza*, or *Lost* today) seem coherently emblematic of a period's mode of production and formal style, but things get much fuzzier once we move to the edges.

It's easy to think of transmediation, franchising, and international distribution as opportunistic empire-building strategies for media corporations at the height of their game. Instead, I think there's ample evidence that they can be better understood as survival strategies for its outsiders. Just as it was entrepreneurial minor players who pioneered telefilm production in the '50s (Ziv, Roach, Desilu, Revue, etc.), it was smaller producers who couldn't crack the dominant industry who pioneered transmedia exploitation, franchising/merchandising, and laid the groundwork for global TV.

Then, as now, it's striking how often childhood is a key terrain for the negotiation of these shifting technologies, forms, and modes of production and distribution. In the 1930s, *Little Orphan Annie*, *The Lone Ranger*, and other media figures moved fluidly between comics radio, film, fan clubs, toys, etc. And by the very early 1950s, children's Westerns like *Hopalong Cassidy* and *The Cisco Kid* (the subjects of my own research) had become not just US commodity intertexts, but were well on their way to becoming global transmedia brands. I've recently discovered thousands of fan letters to *Cisco* star Duncan Renaldo from schoolchildren in British West Africa (soon to become Ghana), beginning in the early '50s. What those kids saw were films, shot ostensibly for US television syndication, but which were screened as "bioscopes" in outdoor village cinemas. More recent examples of international transmedia intertexts abound, as well, from *Ninja Turtles* to *Pokemon*, etc. The centrality of children's media to transmediation has many influences, ranging from the often marginal industrial status of their producers, to the less-rigid taste hierarchies ascribed to such "low" cultural forms (a Hoppy comic doesn't "demean" the character's already low cultural value), to the intimate connection of these characters to the consumer products industries, to the ease with which "newness" and "innovation" can be discursively linked to childhood and youth.

None of this is to say that these kinds of texts are more important than, or directly drove, transformations in dominant modes of production, or that they're the newly-discovered points of origin (a dubious and risky game, because someone will always find an earlier

precedent). But still, what looks in wide shot like a moment of wholesale revolutionary change is likely, in close-up, to be considerably less linear and coherent.