



Media-Nxt, The Future of Media

Interviews with

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KENNEALLY: To see into the future of media, exit Interstate 81 in Syracuse, New York and head to the S. I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University. On campus, the Newhouse School building, from a certain angle, resembles a computer screen and hard drive. That impression can't be any accident. Inside, Newhouse students learn their professions deep in cyberspace.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content.

Media-Nxt, the future of media, is an annual report on media technology, researched and written by Syracuse students working with Sean Branagan, Director of the Center For Digital Media Entrepreneurship at the Newhouse School.

Branagan is a serial entrepreneur, educator, investor and evangelist for innovation and startups. He's chief instigator of media-nxt.org and creator of Student Startup Madness at South by Southwest, a national collegiate startup tournament. Sean Branagan joins me now to share the latest Media-Nxt forecast. Welcome to the program, Sean Branagan.

BRANAGAN: Hi, Chris. Thanks for having me. This is terrific and thanks for having my students, even more important.

KENNEALLY: Well, we'll be talking with them soon, but we want to ask you first, Sean Branagan, to look back on five years of Media-Nxt reports and share with us some of the high points. What have you learned?



BRANAGAN: We learned that the – reaffirmed that the future is uncertain, that things that look so clear and close sometimes are clear but not so close. We've learned that students are a great research tool, because they come into it with a more open mind, and as you'll see when you talk with our two students today, why they're uniquely qualified to do this kind of research.

If you just want me to call out a couple of the early technologies or early trends that we saw, I think it was 2017, we were talking about Blockchain, which everybody is all hyped up on already and we're sort of like, yeah, that's been around a while. Don't worry about that.

And a handful of other things that are now, if you combine them all – would make up what is called the creator economy, which I'm very bullish on. And then another one or two is when deepfakes, which now is more appropriately named, I think, synthetic media, started to make the scene, we were on that as well. So those would be ones, along with the usual VRAR, XR and some of the voice capabilities that are coming into the media space.

KENNEALLY: You have a pretty good track record. You've identified 123 different startups in media and media tech. And in just five years, 15 of those have been acquired, and that really is a pretty good record. If you were running a VC, you'd be doing pretty well.

BRANAGAN: Yeah. We say that every once in a while, like why didn't we place bets on these? We were – obviously we didn't put money in, but we put our name on them and we made some pretty astounding picks. Know that it wasn't just we picked these. Every year that we pick somewhere around 30 to 35, we've looked at probably close to 200.

KENNEALLY: So you're suggesting that the existing media players in the marketplace do something with this information.

BRANAGAN: Yeah, I get a little frustrated at times where I see, especially more established media companies, let a small disruptor take an area they could've had, or actually had. And most of the time it's because that's the kind of thinking that says well, that's not how we do it. Well, OK. You already have the answer in your statement. That's not how you do it, maybe you should reconsider that.

So should you partner with them? Should you invest in them? Should you vend with them? Big companies can do all those things actually quite easily if they just decide that it's important enough to be closer. And then ultimately, these are – especially the startups that we highlight – they're all early stage. They're all affordable. If you've got a few million dollars lying around, they're affordable. And that's the ones that we generally



highlight, not the hot new kid on the block, but startups that are really early. Probably you haven't heard of them.

KENNEALLY: Well, in fact, that's your strategic level advice, Sean Branagan, right? And you call it – you want people to launch an innovation convoy. So what's an innovation convoy and why does that make sense in this environment?

BRANAGAN: I remember sitting at a – this is – wow, this is 15, 20 years ago – I was sitting at a presentation. They brought in a former admiral. I don't know if you're ever a former admiral. Once an admiral, always an admiral, right? So he was talking about how the history of the Navy can inform organizations. That was his sort of – his schtick to go and have a professional speaking career.

He talked at one point that when World War II was announced, and we had just been bombed – Pearl Harbor had been bombed – we're at war on the Pacific Ocean and yay, America! Well, he said in those closed rooms in the Navy, they were like um, we're really not even good at shipping on that Pacific Ocean. We're still this young country, and now we're going to have to not only ship, but move armaments and troops and supplies, and you get it.

They came up with the convoy idea of you will launch this mishmash of vessels and they will learn from each other quickly, and you will also have increased your odds of getting to your destination, if not with all of them, at least with some of them. You will have little ones that are almost ridiculous. You'll have large ones that of course you would do this, but they have to move slower, etc., etc.

The same mindset is the way to mitigate risk in innovation and I've been talking about that one for a while and finally we decided look, we need to really push this prescription as a bigger thing, so we included it in this year's Media-Nxt report as written by Maya Kosoff, but the concept is one that I've been talking about to businesses for a while.

KENNEALLY: And joining us now, is Julia Fontana, who researched the section of Media-Nxt on unbundling Facebook, YouTube and LinkedIn. Julia, welcome to the program.

FONTANA: Hi, Chris. Thank you for having me.

KENNEALLY: Yeah. It's great to have a chance to speak with you. You wrote the section of the Media-Nxt report on unbundling, specifically unbundling Facebook, YouTube and LinkedIn. And you were telling us about the potential downfall in a large platform strategy, which is that they are trying to appeal to everyone and that just may not be the right approach in this new environment.



FONTANA: Yes, exactly, and it's not something that is new. We've seen it before happen with Craigslist, in particular. There's a great article from Andreessen Horowitz that talks about that unbundling as well. When a platform like Craigslist, and now Facebook, we're seeing, tries to appeal to too many, they take on too many features that aren't necessarily suiting anyone and then, as you mentioned, suits no one.

KENNEALLY: Right, and in the unbundling of Craigslist, there appeared a number of companies whose names were not well-known before, but certainly are now.

FONTANA: Yes, definitely. I know of note was Zillow, Upwork and Tinder, off the top of my head.

KENNEALLY: I think Airbnb was part of that as well. So it's really important and it even predates the internet. The breakup of ATT and all the sort of baby Bells really drove a whole generation of innovation and I think what you're suggesting in this unbundling today is that it would do likewise.

And somehow, I suppose, we're going to have to bring up Facebook. It always comes up, and Facebook has done what you're describing, right? They have tried to replicate all the other successful startups out there, so for every Grubhub or Uber Eats, there's a Facebook's Order Food, or for every Twitch, there's a Facebook Live. Even Tinder, they've tried to create a Facebook Dating. There definitely seems to be some limit to that and in fact, it may begin to precipitate a backlash on Facebook.

FONTANA: Yes. I would say so, and I think it's become pretty common knowledge that Facebook does this. I'm not sure if you're familiar with the Instagram story of how they wanted to buy Instagram. Instagram wasn't necessarily interested. They continued to make offers, even suggesting making a competing platform that would dominate Instagram as well, and Instagram ultimately decided to sell to them. So we are seeing those big companies that are taking on those roles, Facebook in particular, and it does make it hard, I would say, for smaller companies like Instagrams at the time to take a stand and to find their own place in the market.

Snapchat has done that successfully in turning down that, but then with that, Instagram and Facebook introduced the stories feature, which was a platform of Snapchat, or a feature of the Snapchat platform. That's not the first time we've seen that. It definitely won't be the only time we see that and Facebook isn't the only platform that is looking to its smaller competitors and integrating their features into their services. So it'll be interesting to see how it continues.



KENNEALLY: So, for example, on YouTube, the adjustments to the algorithm have had a negative impact on a lot of creators' revenue and so this has driven them to other smaller startups that are more creator friendly.

FONTANA: Yes. Patreon comes to mind in particular there. I think Patreon is a very promising startup or first mover in that space that's doing a great job of capitalizing on making it conducive for creators to use their platform, giving them a lot of autonomy over their content, and also allowing them to monetize more directly on their content. Whereas YouTube, under the acquisition by Google, I know that affected the way creators were compensated for their work.

KENNEALLY: And there's even potential with LinkedIn, which is much of a B2B play than B2C, but there as well, there's a kind of clutter on such a tremendously vast platform that some dedicated job sites are trying to clean up.

FONTANA: Yes, definitely. It's difficult on LinkedIn, I would say, because one of the main features of LinkedIn is networking and building your professional network. But it's also a big place to go apply for jobs and look for jobs, and again, a place to message and keep in touch with people, apply for jobs. You can do LinkedIn Learning, that educational content that they have there. There's a lot going on, and I think a lot of people – most users may not even realize there is LinkedIn Learning available to them through their subscription. They may only know the newsfeed. They might not understand the many vast features that are available to them through it.

KENNEALLY: That's true. A lot of those platforms are like the proverbial icebergs, right? You only see about 1/10th of what's really there. So tell us about the compelling startups that you identified in your section.

FONTANA: Yes. So I talked about LocalBuzz and tonebase. LocalBuzz is a localized video sharing mobile app. So it allows users to talk about and share videos and content related to their specific cities. So it started in Phoenix. I believe it's in Austin, Texas and Los Angeles. So it is very small right now, but I think in those markets, it's nice to be able to capitalize on the local areas, taking the larger platform or a similar idea possibly as TikTok, but it making it hyper local and more specific to individual communities.

Tonebase, which is based in Los Angeles, is, I guess, you could say maybe a YouTube type of disruptor, allowing for hyper specialized instruction of music. So people can take music lessons online, which again is very great and I think music is something that you would like to learn from a professional, maybe more than just on a YouTube, and through tonebase, it allows these established musicians in their field to instruct. So higher quality content than would be available for free.



KENNEALLY: Well, Julia, thanks so much for that and we want to turn to your fellow student, Jonathan Harris. Jonathan, welcome to the program.

HARRIS: Thank you for having me. It's good to be here.

KENNEALLY: Well, we're looking forward to chatting with you about something I have to say I know nothing about, but learned about from your portion of the Media-Nxt report, which is what you call no code media. Tell us about no code development tools, what they do and why you think they're so important.

HARRIS: Yeah. No code media tools are a way to make complicated coding very easy by getting rid of the coding aspect altogether. No code functions in multiple different ways, but one of the most common ways you'll see is a simple drag and drop system to create webpages, apps and other applications for mass communication.

KENNEALLY: You compare it to buying a chair from IKEA. How does that fit in with media technology? Explain what you mean.

HARRIS: Yeah. So no code, as I said, is like buying a chair from IKEA in that they give you all the parts, they give the instructions. All you have to do is put it together. What you see on the box is exactly what's going to come out. There's not a deep level of customization. There's not a deep level of weeds that you can get lost into. So it's just a very simple way to build what you need without having to go through the rigmarole of going all the two (sp?) bases, as in like cutting down the tree, getting the chainsaw and building the chair from scratch.

KENNEALLY: This is a way to have the kind of rapid response and personalization that audiences expect these days from whatever media companies they interact with.

HARRIS: Yes, of course. With no code movement, it's fascinating in the fact that a company can, within 15 minutes, create a demo or a test app to see what kind of audience are they going to appeal to. Instead of having to go through an actual code or programmer to make this massive thing, you can create an app within 15 minutes, put it on live, see what response you get and within 24 hours, you have a guideline of where you want to go and you don't need to know coding.

You can do this within 15 minutes. You can go to the website and it will teach you how to do it just like that.

KENNEALLY: Remarkably, there's even no hands, no code.



HARRIS: No hands, no code is the next step of no code, where it's mostly voice or other more intuitive or autonomous systems that you don't even have to really sit down at a computer to do. It's still in the works though.

KENNEALLY: And you've identified several compelling startups as well. Tell us about those.

HARRIS: Zapier works on just automating different applications, so connecting unlike apps together, for example, Google Docs with Slack, so that what you put into a Slack channel can automatically be put up into a Google Doc, just to help automate the process. You also have Buist, (sp?) which does no code advertisement. Again, it's drag and drop system that allows a company or an individual to create rapid response advertisements so that, like I said, you can have a very niche audience and you can within 15 minutes get an advertisement out to that audience without having to go through all the rigmarole.

And then you would have Camera IQ. This is actually very fun. It ties into a little bit of advertisement, but it's mostly a way to do no code augmented reality. So let's say your company wants to have a cute little mascot that appears every time you look at a certain section. You can use no code to apply prompts so, for example, like Snapchat or something, every time you raise your eyebrows, the little creature will appear, all within augmented reality, and you can do all of this within 15 minutes.

KENNEALLY: Sean Branagan, is that what this is about, to not just think about these various particular topics, but to begin to see the connections between them?

BRANAGAN: Yeah. Chris, that was great the way you were taking them through this. I'm so proud of my students. And they're no longer my students, right? So you guys are free.

The idea though that the no code stuff that Jon's talking about isn't coming. It's here. It's just not wildly and widely available yet. Same with some of the unbundling has already begun in Julia's world, and those startups are indicators, not trials. Those are indicators. There's already a market there for a lot of these. MasterClass is one that I see as – the number one search string on YouTube is how to blank, and yes, they're not going to go after how to fix my washing machine. That may not be a big market right now, but you can very easily, as a startup or as a media company looking to take advantage of this how-to environment, find how many videos and what's the viewership and subscribership around a topic. And if that's your media world, why let it flutter away and be in this environment in YouTube when you could launch the higher end version of that.

KENNEALLY: Well, the way to end this conversation, I think, is to ask the two students about where they think this may lead them in their work after they've left the classroom. So



Julia, I'll start with you. Did the research you did for the report for Media-Nxt report have an impact on what you want to do in your future life?

FONTANA: When larger platforms are unbundling and there are new players rising into the scene to meet these needs, like Sean was explaining, the needs are there. They're not trials. They exist. The markets are there. It provides so many opportunities for new graduates and young professionals like myself to get involved in these new opportunities, and that is something that I hadn't previously considered before, but has definitely shifted the course of my career in a positive way.

KENNEALLY: Jon Harris, what about the impact on the way you see your professional career unfolding? The research you've done and the way you've been looking at no code, for example, but perhaps beyond that, has that steered you in a certain direction?

HARRIS: Oh, yes, of course. The beauty of no code is that it's like a giant key. It opens up so many doors that you didn't think possible before and it goes so much deeper than just webspace design, like Webs (sp?) or Squarespace. One of the ones I was looking at is Voiceflow, which is all about creating AI conversation bots and all.

So it's one of these tools that you get it, and you just feel like the world before you has gotten a little bit smaller and a lot more open in that you don't know what you're going to do with it, but you have the tools to do whatever you want when it comes to mind.

KENNEALLY: Well, it's been a pleasure speaking with everyone involved in the research and writing of the Media-Nxt report. I want to thank our participants. Jon Harris, thank you for joining me.

HARRIS: Thank you. Thank you so much.

KENNEALLY: Julia Fontana as well, good to have you with us.

FONTANA: Thank you. It's been great to be there.

KENNEALLY: Thank you. And Sean Branagan, it's been a pleasure having you on the program too. Thank you.

BRANAGAN: Thanks, Chris.

KENNEALLY: And with that, we'll conclude our program today. Our coproducer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. You can subscribe to the program wherever you go for podcasts and please do follow us on Twitter and Facebook.



I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for being with us and join us soon for another Velocity of Content podcast from CCC.

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