LEARNING TO SHARE
THE RELATIONAL LOGICS OF MEDIA FRANCHISING

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Executive Summary

In the contemporary media environment, it has become increasingly commonplace—and commonsense—to refer to successful, long-running intellectual properties as “franchises.” In May 2010, for example, Advertising Age made sense of the sale of Snoopy, Woodstock, and the rest of Charles Shultz’s Peanuts gang to the Iconix Brand Group in these terms, valuating the history of the property and its continuing potential in the global media marketplace by exclaiming “It’s a Great Franchise, Charlie Brown” (Bulik 2010). This metaphor for making sense of media properties extends beyond trade discourse, with popular blogs also participating in the franchise conversation. In a recent post later picked up by Yahoo! News, Life’s Little Mysteries blogger Mike Avila meditates on the media franchise by trying to determine “the most successful movie franchise of all time.” Having decided to make box office revenue the deciding factor, Avila awards the crown to the Harry Potter series and its $5.4 billion in ticket sales—but with the caveat that Star Wars would gain an advantage if merchandising were to be considered, while the James Bond films exceed both in terms of overall longevity.

Such posts contribute to an overall popular understanding of the media franchise as the result of ongoing management of a property across time and various markets, corroborating the perceptions of industry insiders like Disney’s Robert Iger, who similarly defines franchise as “something that creates value across multiple businesses and across multiple territories over a long period of time” (Siklos 2009). The economic meanings carried by this metaphor, however, have also been negotiated by those working creatively with these properties, whose individual interests and energies must be asserted in the face of all this successful brand maintenance. Reflecting on the conclusion of the TV series Lost in 2010, producer Carlton Cuse notes: “We certainly understand and absolutely respect that ABC and Disney has an incredibly valuable franchise and they want to do more things with Lost, but the story we’re telling ends in May” (Chozick 2010). Because Lost is understood in this way as one of the most successful television franchises of the early twenty-first century, Cuse finds it necessary as a stakeholder to reassert the role of creative individuality within the perpetual corporate management of the shared property.
This notion of media franchising, therefore, shapes how analysts, executives, creators, and popular audiences each imagine the media industries of the contemporary moment. And as Cuse’s attempt to position his work outside perceptions of franchising demonstrates, this metaphor is a particularly loaded one, often negatively connoting corporate control and exploitation of a cash cow at the expense of independence and artistry. Without a doubt, many of these connotations come from the wider cultural history of franchising. Prior to the industrial revolution, a franchise was conceived primarily in the political terms of enfranchisement. Derived from the French franchir (to free), the word “franchise” conveyed one’s right to participate and pursue one’s interests free of constraint. Within a collective system such as electoral politics, the franchise was, by and large, a freely determined individual vote. However, as historians of marketing such as Harry Kursh argue, this free right to participate took on more economic—and more sinister—connotations by the nineteenth century, as emerging tycoons “slit each other’s corporate throats” in fierce competition to be awarded “franchise” rights over utilities, railroads, and other elements of public infrastructure (1968: 194). According to scholar T.S. Dicke, the term acquired an additional use around 1959, newly deployed to describe business systems in which corporate franchisors operating on a national level develop a trademarked system of doing business enter into contractual relations with franchisees who pay a fee to independently operate outlets on the local level (1992: 2).

It is from this usage that most consumers understand global business operations such as McDonald’s restaurants, Meineke auto shops, or Best Western hotels. Thus, as industry analysts in Variety, Hollywood Reporter, and other sites of trade discourse began in the early 1990s to make sense of media content and its production as “franchising” (moving the term beyond existing usage to describe the assignment of broadcasting licenses and municipal cable monopolies as franchise rights to infrastructure), the term brought with it a great deal of historical and cultural baggage. To think about media culture as franchise is to think about it in the same terms that make sense of fast food. And in the same way that critics like George Ritzer (2000) have lamented the increasing standardization and rationalized control of culture as what he calls the “McDonaldization” of society, the articulation of media to fast food reflects allows the latter to act as cultural shorthand for the inadequacies of the former.
So while media franchising has been frequently invoked in industrial, popular, and scholarly discourse, perceptions of its economic determinism and its lack of cultural value have at least partially sidelined specific attempts to understand what the franchising of media culture actually means. In most accounts, the media franchise is a rather simple effect, figured most often as a product of increasing corporate power and conglomeration or as the endgame for intellectual property management strategies. Even as Henry Jenkins (2006), for one potentially divergent example, considers the franchised intellectual property more productively as a site where new forms of narrative practice and cultural collaboration have emerged, the media franchise is positioned and understood in relation to the larger patterns of convergence culture and transmedia storytelling. Nevertheless, media franchising is a phenomenon in its own right, not confined to specifically transmedia considerations, as properties like Law & Order and CSI have become understood as franchises for their multiplication within the single medium of television. Similarly, in The Frodo Franchise, scholar Kristin Thompson (2007) offers a detailed picture of the Lord of the Rings franchise, but in arguing about its exceptional character, her book offers only a limited perspective on the phenomenon of media franchising at large.

But what can we learn from the logic of franchising itself? What does it tell us about how cultural production and creative collaboration might work? How can we make use of this understanding? With much of this phenomenon remaining to be explored by media researchers, this project aims to directly confront and deconstruct the cultural logics of franchising in order to understand it not as the effected product of other issues and forces, but as a process and set of relationships that have historically produced culture. Though the notion of the franchise carries with it much cultural baggage, those entrenched meanings and values accompany a very specific logic for organizing and making sense of cultural production sustained over time and across multiple market sectors. By developing a detailed, historical portrait of what franchising is and how it has worked, we will deepen our understanding of how culture has been collaboratively produced and consumed across decentralized networks of “enfranchised” stakeholders. To that end, this inquiry combines current research trajectories in media and cultural studies with conceptual models drawn from the fields of marketing and organizational communication to make sense of media franchising as a social practice. This approach demands we consider franchising not solely in terms of texts, products, brands, or properties, but also through power-laden, networked relationships between franchisors and franchisees with distinct interests in the shared cultural resources of the franchise. By combining analysis of trade press with archival research and original interviews with media professionals, this project examines how these shared resources have been deployed, managed, and sustained in specific historical instances by media institutions, creative personnel, and even consumers invested in them.
Key Findings

Ultimately, this study recognizes that any attempt to define the media franchise once and for all is an exercise in futility, as its slippery cultural meanings are perhaps what make it such a versatile means of understanding a wide variety of media practices. Nonetheless, by arguing that franchising offers a cultural structure through which media content, media institutions, and media audiences have been put into productive relations, this study helps point to the relational, collaborative logic that defines a franchised culture. From this perspective, five key findings will be delivered to demonstrate the value of comprehending franchising as a structure for organizing collaborative cultural production:

**The Cultural Logic of Franchising is Relational:** franchising must be understood as relational given its dependence on sustained, strategic relationships between stakeholders with unequal interest in shared cultural resources; franchises are not reflective of intellectual property monopolies, but instead negotiation of imperfectly aligned interests.

**Franchising Drives Institutional Relationships:** the cultural networks constituted by franchising have not merely bolstered the power of “big media” institutions, but rather, in driving institutional relationships, have created tensions, cleavages and challenges to be negotiated by conglomerates and upstarts alike. The franchise strategies of companies like Marvel Comics, when most successful, have depended upon institutional partnerships.

**Franchising Supports Creative Relationships:** franchising must also be understood with respect to creative relationships, in that it has enabled co-creation and collaboration through decentralized, emergent uses of shared story worlds. Users of properties like Battlestar Galactica must negotiate not only the structure of a shared set of narrative resources, but also hierarchies of creative power that encourage and constrain creative uses of them.

**Franchising Generates Consumer- Constituent Relationships:** as shared cultural resources, franchised worlds have supported what can be described as consumer-constituent relationships. Invited to invest at a variety of productive, affective, and even civic levels, consumers act as defacto franchisees, pursuing their own economic and political interests in the institutional and creative management of programs like 24.

**Franchising Extends Transnational and Transgenerational Relationships:** franchises support transnational and transgenerational relations through ongoing exchange, transformation, and reinvestment. Franchises like Transformers can be most productively understood not as globally traded products, but as cultural processes in which local innovations feed cross-cultural networks of production over long periods of time.
From these findings, this project theorizes the culture of media franchising to uncover an established tradition of collaborative production in the entertainment industries. As a cultural logic structuring production in relational terms, the media franchise might therefore be considered, despite its more historical, less cutting-edge character, a crucial corollary to any attempt to understand emerging “social media.”

**Recommendations**

By reflecting on the heterogeneous interests in a shared set of resources implied by the term “franchise,” we gain a much clearer insight into the social, institutional, and creative relationships by which culture has been produced and reproduced in the media industries. To be sure, media franchises are not reducible to the franchise relationships that have structured the retail and service industries over the past sixty to seventy years. Relationships geared toward the expansion of distribution channels and marketing reach function much differently from those aimed at multiplying the production of media culture.

Moreover, the degree to which the cultural logic of franchises (as it has been described in this white paper) is consciously and strategically recognized in the media industries remains to be seen. Many of the executives and creative professionals interviewed for this project disavowed or distanced themselves from the very notion of franchising, claiming ignorance of the term or explaining that such considerations were outside their job description. This likely means that relatively few producers are actually thinking in any real depth about media franchises. While the practices and relationships described here may be in place, a firm structural and strategic logic may not actually underlie them in practice.

Thinking more strategically in terms of franchising—and the cultural logic it implies—has some distinct advantages, and it is here that some initial recommendations can be synthesized:

1. Practitioners should consider franchising in terms of its instructive potential as a historical precedent.

2. The relational logic of media franchising challenges industry insiders to reconsider any strategic logics structured around singular control over the use of intellectual properties.

3. In contrast to prohibitive top-down controls, open and heterogeneous creative experimentation can be relied upon to renew and regenerate existing intellectual property production resources.

4. In developing collaborative productive models, industry professionals should develop greater appreciation of contributions that emerge from outside the top echelons of power. By thinking of licensed creators and fans alike as “franchisees,” license holders can recognize vital stakeholders in the ongoing production of media properties.
Works Cited


