# The 5 Media Trends I'm Thankful For

*This story was originally published in On Background with Mark Stenberg, a free, weekly newsletter that explores the key themes shaping the media industry. You can sign up for it here.*

The media industry has no shortage of existential crises on its plate. From the disruption posed by artificial intelligence to the precipitously low levels of consumer trust, publishers often find themselves on the defensive, reacting to adversarial conditions that threaten their very ability to survive.

I cover those elements frequently and with the appropriate measure of sobriety, but Thursday in the U.S. is Thanksgiving, and it pays to remember that the media industry is not entirely bereft of its tailwinds. Plus, as Cormac McCarthy once wrote, you never know what worse luck your bad luck has saved you from.

So, in that spirit, here are five trends in the media industry that I am grateful for, which offer at least some morsel of optimism for the future.

## 1. The dawn of the pay-per-crawl

As I have amply covered, one of the chief threats to the media industry is the unpaid use of its content to power AI answer engines. Outside of a handful of bespoke deals, the vast majority of content creators have watched powerlessly as AI firms hoover up their data, repackage it, and use it to answer users' questions.

In recent months though, several new initiatives have emerged that offer a framework for a marketplace that could allow this model to persist while still managing to compensate the publishers that enable it.

Just last week, I wrote about an experiment involving Criteo and the media network Raptive that used a pay-per-crawl infrastructure to generate $174 in a case study involving an independent food publisher. These are often referred to as "the Spotify model," as it effectively does for text content what streaming did for music.

Firms like Cloudflare, Fastly, Tollbit, ProRata, Criteo, and others support this kind of model, which would effectively charge AI firms for the right to crawl a website. But these efforts are nascent and face significant roadblocks. For instance, what incentive would the AI firms have to participate? Outside of a legal mandate, I have heard few truly convincing answers to that question.

Still, at least there's some groundwork. It also bears mentioning that this is not just for the benefit of publishers. The system as it currently exists is evidently unsustainable: AI firms rely on content creators while eliminating their ability to fund their content. The sooner we arrive at an equitable solution, the better off the internet is.

## 2. The vodcast extravaganza

Blame it on the 2024 election, perhaps, but 2025 was the year vodcasting—the vogue new term for a video podcast—went supernova.

Nearly overnight, audio-only podcasts have nearly disappeared. Suddenly, a podcast appearance became something you had to look good for.

This has been beneficial in a variety of ways. First, for the podcast industry, it has allowed the medium to tap into video advertising budgets, which are much larger.

It has also helped podcasting solve its lingering discovery problem, as users can now come across podcast clips on social media (which tend to favor video posts) that they might've otherwise never bothered to explore.

But I think most impactful is that vodcasts have given publishers and creators a low-lift means of entering more meaningfully into the world of video content. A podcast is often simply an interview, which journalists conduct on the regular. Film the exchange, put it on YouTube, and voila: You have turned a reporter into a vodcaster.

This is a relatively incremental shift, but it has important implications for this next trend.

## 3. The creator-ification continues apace

Nearly a decade too late, publishers have finally started taking cues from creators—at least when it comes to the ways they package and distribute their content.

Most notably, this has been made manifest in the increasing volume of video output now coming from publishers. News outlets including The New York Times and Washington Post have even incorporated whole tabs into their mobile apps designed to replicate the experience of scrolling through TikTok.

But it extends beyond any single channel. You see it in Vox launching on Patreon and The Financial Times joining Substack. You see it in the new breed of creator-publisher partnerships, such as Platformer's Casey Newton joining The New York Times through Hard Fork or Alex Heath working with Vox via Sources. Even internally, publishers like Axios, Wired, and Bloomberg are franchising their star reporters, building out brands around their talent because audiences gravitate to

individuals.

The downstream effects of this shift are more important than any one journalist doing a front-facing video. They reflect the emergence of a new way of balancing the benefits of an institution with the appeals of a creator. Publishers have historically resisted this atomization, but there is increasing proof that a middle ground is possible and rewarding.

## 4. Creator-led media scales up

On a related note, a media executive once told me that the digital transformation of news was all about right-sizing: the big players needed to get smaller, and the small players needed to get bigger.

Until recently, we have seen plenty of the former but very little of the latter. This year, that began to change. The Substack revolution of the early pandemic gave rise to a wave of solo creators, but only recently have those independent outfits begun to scale up, giving rise to sustainable operations that cultivate a smaller but more engaged audience, often through subscriptions.

The Free Press is obviously the poster child of this evolution, having secured a $150 million exit. But a number of other creator-centric publishers have lately approached escape velocity themselves.

Emily Sundberg’s FeedMe, naturally, is perhaps most emblematic of this shift, but Puck represents a far more sophisticated iteration of the trend. Alongside it are stalwarts like Defector, which continues to chug along unbothered, as well as Zeteo, Status, 404Media, Newcomer, Platformer, TBPN, A Media Operator, Drop Site News, and The Bulwark. You could even throw Semafor in the mix.

These publishers might be small, but their continuity feels far more assured than that of the media giants of yesteryear. Even as it was happening, the multibillion-dollar valuations of sites like BuzzFeed, Vice, Vox, and Business Insider felt like the product of a fever dream. Maybe media has learned from its mistakes, at least to some degree, and the newest torch-bearers are far more durable than their predecessors.

## 5. Publishers, meet marketing

Despite their reliance on advertising, publishers have been oddly loath to market themselves. This year, that began to change.

As I reported, six publishers ran brand-marketing campaigns this year, several of which did so for the first time in company history. Outlets including Hearst, Wired, Reuters, MarketWatch, NBC News, and The Guardian all paid for splashy spots across digital and physical media in recent months, all in service of shaping their brand identity. Other premium publishers, including The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and Bloomberg, also regularly flog their pedigree.

Similarly, this year has been filled with media rebrands: Max regained its HBO garlands, MSNBC changed to MSNow (as NBCUniversal's cable networks split off into Versant) , Dotdash Meredith transformed into People Inc., and Gannett became USA Today Co. These are not brand-marketing campaigns per se, but they are certainly born of a greater focus on how consumers perceive their companies.

This shift is largely the result of the shifting information landscape, where passive discovery has disappeared and publishers must proactively pursue consumers. As with the creator-ification trend I mentioned earlier, the importance here is not specifically one brand campaign, but the mindset shift that the trend reflects.

Publishers thinking of themselves not so much as news or entertainment firms, but as brands whose product is a specific kind of information, will find themselves far better positioned to compete in an ecosystem where content and data are ubiquitous. It might be an awkward evolution, but it is one long past due.

Recommended videos
https://www.adweek.com/media/media-trends-grateful-ai-vodcast-creators-onbackground/