



THE MEDIUM IS NOT NEUTRAL

HOW ADVANCEMENTS IN TECHNOLOGY RESHAPE CULTURE VIA MEDIA AND ENTERTAINMENT

By Dani Van de Sande & Emma Joelle
In conversation with Michael Wise



The authors would like to thank Michael Wise, Jon Rogers, Don Allen Stevenson III, Hannah Elsagr, and Liz Tingue for their invaluable contributions to the piece.



The Medium Was Never Neutral

It is easier to see in retrospect. The printing press reorganized religion and politics. Cinema globalized storytelling and converged culture across borders. Television relocated media into the living room and domesticated entertainment. Each technological shift changed not only distribution, but behavior: where we gathered, how long we paid attention, who we experienced stories with, and which narratives could plausibly dominate. One generation leaned forward as Dorothy stepped from sepia Kansas into Technicolor Oz, and the next encountered an entirely new visual language on mobile.

We are in the middle of another paradigm shift. What appears to be an expansion of formats, including short-form video, AI-native micro dramas, interactive plot lines, and immersive worlds, is a deeper shift in how culture is produced, distributed, and lived. Mobile and AI are not simply tools layered onto existing systems; they define the constraints within which media and entertainment now evolve.

From Theaters to Living Rooms to Pockets

The advent of film technology created cinema as a physical gathering point and, with it, a new medium of cultural transmission. Audiences left their homes, entered a darkened theater, and surrendered two uninterrupted hours to a storyline. Beyond altering viewing habits, this ritual synchronized attention, turning stories into vehicles through which ideas, fashions, political sentiments, and social norms could circulate rapidly and coherently. Scale justified spectacle, so budgets rose alongside the growth of captive attention.

Then along came television, which disrupted the ritual of cinema. As television sets entered the home, narrative moved with them, relocating storytelling from public theaters into domestic space. Episodic structure flourished because stories could return weekly. [The living room became the site of culture](#), and programming shaped modern domestic life, from watching the moon landing unfold live or turning on the evening news to learn of the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

Then the medium went mobile, and once again the rules of the game shifted. Entertainment followed consumers on commutes, in waiting rooms, and filling idle minutes – every gap became attention real estate to leverage. The phone did not merely distribute content differently, it [reorganized time](#). Attention took the shape of an accordion – shorter, fragmented, yet continuous. Social platforms filled the entertainment vacuum quickly because they were designed specifically for the medium with infinite scroll, algorithmic curation, and endless discovery. The same mechanics later carried viral TikTok dances, recipes, and stitched reactions across millions of phones during the pandemic.



Traditional studios moved more slowly. Premium storytelling remained anchored to hour-long episodes and cinematic arcs designed for sustained, undivided attention. Feeds, by contrast, conditioned audiences to consume in short, recurring intervals throughout the day. Narrative either adapted or drifted out of alignment with evolving attention spans.

When Cost Structures Change, Culture Changes

Every medium encodes economic assumptions. Vinyl records and CDs favored albums because manufacturing and distribution costs demanded bundling, whereas streaming [dissolved that constraint](#), collapsing a process that once meant hovering over a cassette deck to time a mixtape into the simple act of dragging songs into a playlist. The single regained dominance, playlists became a primary source of music discovery, and custom AI-generated soundscapes emerged. Streaming platforms like [Spotify](#) and [Apple Music](#) [refactored](#) listening around mood and personal context, shifting discovery from release cycles to algorithmic recommendations and curated playlists. AI-native systems like [Endel](#) take this a step further, generating real-time sound environments that adapt to your focus level, movement, or time of day.

A similar recalibration is underway in narrative. Traditional episodic television can cost tens of thousands of dollars per minute, and a prestige drama can easily run into the [millions per episode](#). That economic landscape [narrows focus toward](#) large audiences, recognizable IP, and risk mitigation. When a project carries a nine-figure budget, the room for experimentation typically narrows.

“AI is revolutionizing content creation at an astonishing pace. Not only does AI-assisted production compress cost and timelines, it’s unlocking a new creative palate which is just beginning to surface. At the same time, new narrative structures - signaled by microdramas - connect with mobile-native audiences hungry for storytelling as an alternative to endless doom scrolling. We’re at a historical inflection point where new story formats and interaction modalities, mobile-native audiences, and breakthrough technologies are converging all at once. The result will be a powerful new era of entertainment - one that finally realizes the storytelling potential of the most ubiquitous screen in history: the mobile phone.” — [Michael Wise](#), Former CTO, Universal Pictures

Lower production costs improve margins and reduce the scale a project needs to survive. A story no longer needs tens of millions of viewers to justify its existence. A quarter-million committed fans can sustain a series that would previously have failed to clear the budget hurdle. That shift opens space for long-tail IP such as board games, niche fandoms, regional sports leagues, and cult novels to support serialized storytelling without needing to become global blockbusters.



“The economics of entertainment have always shaped what gets made. When theatrical costs over \$1 million a minute, budgets shape storytelling as much as creative vision. Many ideas were creatively strong but financially difficult to justify because the audience was regional or niche. When AI responsibly lowers that barrier, more stories get made.

Every major creative shift, from the camera to Photoshop to CGI and 3D, initially felt disruptive. AI is no different, and if creators and studios keep human authorship at the center, this moment will open the door to a new Cambrian explosion of storytelling.” — [Hannah Elsagr](#), Vice President of GenAI New Business Ventures, Adobe

Short-Form as a Transitional Format

Micro-dramas, particularly those pioneered in [Asian markets](#), such as China, show that short-form storytelling can deliver emotional payoff within the rhythms of mobile life. Episodes measured in minutes align with fragmented attention patterns while still sustaining narrative arcs through tight pacing and recurring cliffhangers. Rather than gathering audiences for scheduled viewing, these stories unfold across commutes, downtime, and in-between moments, embedding narrative into daily routines. In this model, culture shifts from event-based consumption toward continuous engagement, mirroring how streaming reorganized music listening into an ongoing, mood-driven experience.

Short-form on mobile may be transitional because the interface itself is in flux. The smartphone concentrated culture onto a small screen, but AI is shifting interaction toward voice, ambient systems, and multimodal hardware. OpenAI’s collaboration with Jony Ive on an [AI-native device](#) suggests the next dominant interface may not resemble a phone at all, but operate as conversational, context-aware technology. If the primary medium changes, storytelling will change with it. Mobile compressed culture into the pocket; AI-enabled systems are poised to bring it to life across environments.

From Screen to World

For generations, humans have gravitated toward wherever media was made available: theaters, living rooms, feeds – viewers entered the container. Immersive environments such as [Meow Wolf](#), the [Sphere](#), and [Cosm](#) signal a growing appetite for immersive media and entertainment, but they still require viewers to travel to them.

As world models and multimodal systems mature, media no longer needs to sit inside a frame. It can function as a continuous layer that meets us where we are. Instead of selecting a story, viewers step into an adaptive environment, moving through a simulation that adjusts to context, memory, and preference. Narrative becomes spatial and responsive, more like wandering through a city where the soundtrack shifts as you turn a corner and characters react to your presence.



“The future of media isn’t one world, it’s three. Some people will go fully immersive, trading physical presence for hyper-personalized virtual environments that honestly start to feel more real than real life. Others will swing the opposite direction entirely, where in-person experience becomes the ultimate luxury good. But the most interesting space is that middle layer where AR interfaces, spatial audio, and AI agents let you command virtual worlds while staying physically present. The question was never whether we’d have the technology to build these worlds. It’s whether we’ll be intentional enough to design the doorways between them.” — [Don Allen Stevenson III](#)

This raises a structural question about social experience. Each technological shift has tended to narrow the radius of shared attention, from collective theaters to domestic viewing to individualized feeds. If inhabitable media personalizes at the level of environment, isolation could deepen as each person occupies a distinct narrative layer. Yet the same systems could also enable shared worlds in which interaction, collaboration, and co-presence are built into the design. Gaming has spent two decades proving that model can work. Whether culture becomes more atomized or more collective will depend less on technical capability than on how these environments are architected and what incentives guide them.

Abundance and the Curation Crisis

As creation becomes cheaper and more prolific, supply expands faster than human capacity to consume it. More shows, clips, worlds, and generative outputs compete for the same finite attention. The bottleneck shifts from production to selection, making visibility the constraint. Algorithms and social graphs determine what surfaces, turning distribution into a structural advantage.

*“Driven by advances in AI, barriers to entry and traditional gatekeepers will continue to fall. Content supply will explode, and audience attention will become the scarce resource. The companies that win may not be the ones that simply produce the most, or even the best content, but the ones that can consistently aggregate and retain audiences. In an environment of abundance, the real competitive advantage becomes curation and discovery. That points toward a different kind of media company: a new type of studio focused on awareness, engagement, and cultural relevance.” — [Jon Rogers](#), **Former Head of Franchise Development, Walt Disney Studios.***

In a saturated landscape, audiences look for orientation. Recognizable IP carries value not only because it reduces financial risk, but because it offers familiarity amid excess, even as lower production costs allow niche properties to sustain viable audiences. Studios, platforms, and creators operate within this tension: formats can be replicated and talent can move, but reach and effective discovery remain durable advantages. When supply approaches infinity, the technology that filters and frames content shapes culture itself.



Cultural Implications

New technological mediums shape behavior, behavior influences narrative form, and narrative form shapes how we understand the world. Mobile intensified personalization and weakened shared reference points. AI-driven participation may deepen immersion further, placing individuals inside tailored narrative layers rather than alongside a common feed. At the same time, lower production barriers widen access, enabling creators and communities once constrained by capital to build and distribute their own worlds.

The risks are present: too much content competing for fixed attention, models trained on the same underlying material producing aesthetic sameness, and engagement systems that reward virality over quality. The opportunities are perhaps even bigger: deeper interactivity, sustainable economic models for subcultures, and storytelling that adapts to lived context.

Mobile reorganized time. AI is reorganizing economics and expanding creative possibilities. Immersive systems will reorganize space. Each layer changes how stories are made, distributed, and experienced, shifting culture from fixed works we consume to environments we inhabit. As technological architectures shift, so does media, and with it, culture.

The medium is not neutral. It never was.

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