

The Evolution Of The Dissemination Of Information

From Broadsheets to Broadcast Selves

As a sixty-six year old writer, I've seen the entire "modern" publishing world come and go. I've experienced, personally, the 20th century and now the 21st century advancements that have changed the face of disseminating information. I thought it was an important topic to look into.

There are really two parallel evolutions to trace:

- the evolution of how information is distributed
- the evolution of the tools that drove it.

Those two histories keep colliding with each other.

Every major change in media came from two things happening at once: new tools became cheaper and easier to use, and more people gained the ability to bypass experts and institutions. But each wave of democratization eventually created so much noise and complexity that it also created new specialists.

In other words:

- Specialists dominate.
- Tools become cheaper and easier.
- Ordinary people try to do it themselves.
- Quality drops or becomes uneven.
- New professionals emerge.
- A new industry is born.
- Then the cycle repeats.

1. Before Mass Media



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Information by Voice, Memory, and Trust

Before newspapers, radio, television, and the internet, all the things we are familiar with; information moved slowly. News spread by horse, by cart, by ship, and by foot. A story might take days, weeks, or months to travel from one town to another.

In the Ancient world, before the 1400s, in rural areas, news often arrived with the people who passed through. Traders, merchants, tinkers, chapmen, priests, soldiers, and travelers carried information from village to village as they moved along roads and trade routes.

A tinker might arrive in a village with a cart full of pots to sell, tools to sharpen, and tools to repair things, but he also brought stories. He might tell of a farm sold three villages away, a merchant robbed on the road, a wedding in the next parish, a poor harvest to the north, or rumors of war in a nearby kingdom.

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In many ways, the traveling tinker was an early information node: part repairman, part merchant, part gossip network. And strangely, that becomes a familiar pattern.

Before the printing press, information was deeply local. A village might know everything about births, deaths, marriages, weather, livestock, and disputes within a few miles, but almost nothing about events farther away. There were central depositories of this information: the local church. The church, regardless of denomination, was the meeting place that everyone went to.

News traveled through:

- priests delivering sermons
- town criers making announcements
- handwritten letters
- merchants and travelers
- local gatherings and markets
- taverns and inns

The tools of this era were simple but essential:

- horses and carts
- parchment and paper
- handwritten ledgers
- quill pens and ink
- church bells to gather people
- public notice boards
- road networks and trade routes
- inns and taverns where travelers exchanged stories

Information was spread by those the people trusted. The people knew them, and they held a respected place in the society. Trust mattered because information could not easily be verified. People judged the truth of a story not by whether it was printed, but by whether they trusted the person telling it.

Information in this period behaved much like folklore. Each retelling could change it. Details might be forgotten, exaggerated, softened, or invented entirely.

In this sense, pre-print information networks were surprisingly similar to modern social media. Information was fragmented, emotional, local, and heavily dependent on trusted personalities.

The invention of the printing press would begin to change that by making information reproducible, repeatable, and scalable.

2. Printing Presses and Broadsheets



Around 1440, Johannes Gutenberg developed the movable-type printing press in Europe, creating one of the most important turning points in the history of information dissemination. For the first time, large numbers of identical pages could be reproduced quickly and relatively cheaply.

The invention of the printing press changed information from something spoken to something reproducible.

For the first time, the same message could be printed dozens or hundreds of times in exactly the same form. A speech could become a pamphlet. A rumor could become a broadsheet. A list of prices, laws, market notices, or political arguments could be distributed to large numbers of people.

The ability to reproduce the same message thousands of times was instrumental in the fight for labor laws, union organizing, abolition, and women's rights.

Pamphlets, newspapers, broadsides, posters, and newsletters allowed reformers to spread ideas beyond a single town or meeting hall. Activists could organize rallies, distribute arguments, publish testimonies, and build movements across large geographic areas.

Women's suffrage campaigns, labor organizers, abolitionists, and reformers all relied heavily on printed material to educate supporters, coordinate action, and pressure governments.

Printing made information more durable. It no longer depended entirely on memory.

Broadsheets, pamphlets, political cartoons, and early newspapers began to appear across Europe.

These early printed pieces were often:

- short
- inexpensive
- highly opinionated
- sensational
- political
- designed to provoke discussion

A broadsheet was, in many ways, the social media post of its era: quick to produce, easy to distribute, and often designed to stir emotion. They carried news of wars, scandals, crimes, disasters, executions, trade information, shipping news, local events, and political arguments.

But the printing press did not democratize information overnight. Printing still required expensive equipment, paper, ink, skilled printers, physical distribution networks, literacy, and money.

Specialized Tools

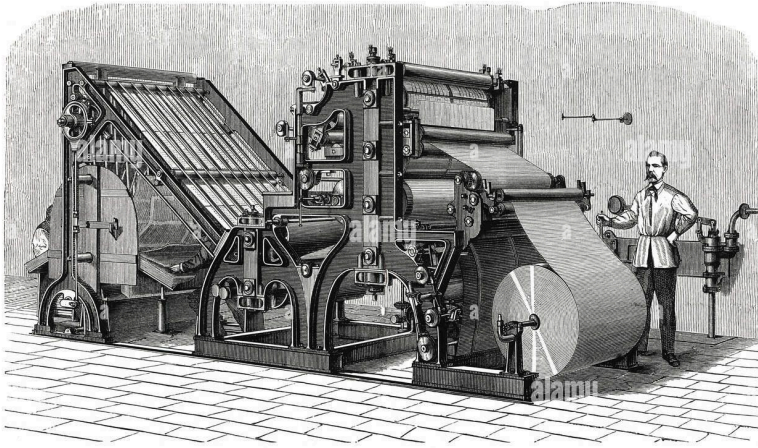
The tools that drove this era included movable type, hand-operated printing presses, carved woodcuts, metal type blocks, printing ink, paper mills, postal systems, stagecoaches, and shipping routes.

The people who owned the presses controlled what was printed. In that sense, printers became the first modern media gatekeepers. Yet the economics were already beginning to resemble the modern creator economy.

Printers needed repeat customers, subscribers, wealthy patrons, political sponsors, and advertisers. A pamphlet or newspaper only survived if people found it useful enough to pay for. The more useful, entertaining, shocking, or politically important the information was, the more likely people were to buy it.

In many ways, the first newspaper printers faced the same challenge that modern content creators face today: how do you convince people to keep paying for information they could ignore for free?

3. Newspapers and the Age of Institutional Authority



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As printing technology improved, newspapers became larger, more regular, and more professional. The industrial age introduced faster presses, cheaper paper, railways, telegraphs, photography, typewriters, and telephone networks.

These tools transformed journalism from a local activity into a mass industry. For the first time, news could move faster than people. The telegraph was especially revolutionary because it allowed information to travel almost instantly across great distances.

The telegraph “shrunk” the world, because news once unattainable except through long manual transport, was transmitted across the ocean at the speed of electricity. News of WWI was delivered across the world as soon as it was learned. For the first time, someone in America could receive news from Europe as it happened.

The major tools of this period included:

- steam-powered printing presses
- telegraphs
- railways
- photography
- rotary presses
- typewriters
- telephone networks
- wire services such as Reuters and Associated Press

Once electricity was widely distributed, a new form of information dissemination became the radio. But radio broadcasts also created another category: entertainment. Radio had an enormous range of entertainment formats. Some of the most famous radio genres included:

- soap operas like *Ma Perkins* and *Backstage Wife*
- mystery and crime shows like *The Shadow*
- science fiction and adventure series like *Flash Gordon* and *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century*
- children’s programs like *Little Orphan Annie*

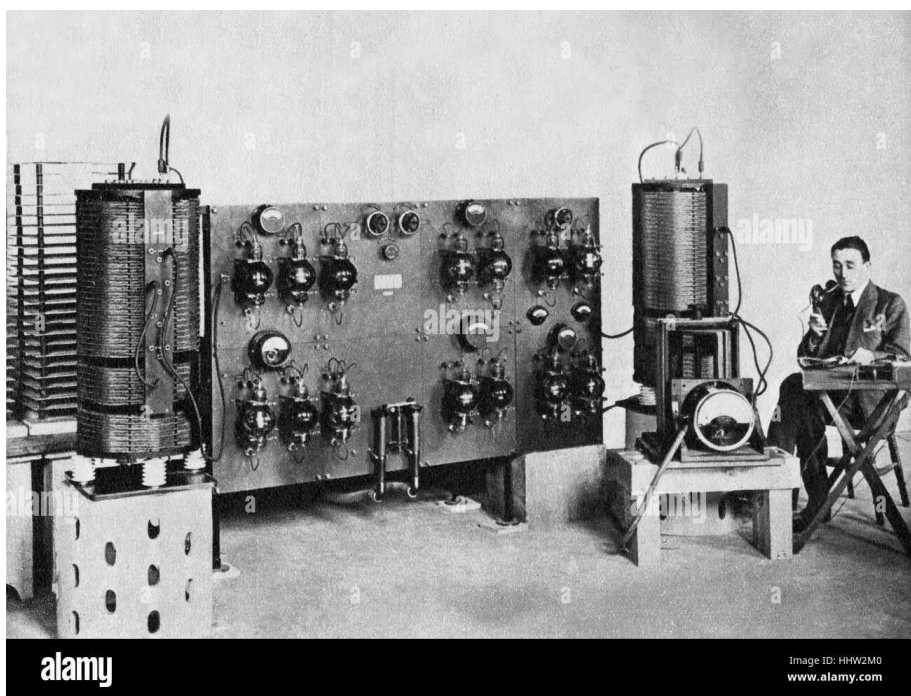
- prestige drama anthologies like The Mercury Theatre on the Air
- quiz shows where listeners competed for prizes
- live dance music from famous bandleaders such as Benny Goodman and Tommy Dorsey

A lot of these later moved directly to television. In many ways, radio was the prototype for TV programming. Sitcoms, soap operas, sports broadcasts, quiz shows, and dramas all existed on radio before they appeared on television.

These technologies, print, radio, and television, allowed the growth of large institutions with editors, reporters, photographers, fact-checkers, printing plants, delivery systems, and advertising departments.

This was the era when media became industrial. Information became something produced by organizations rather than individuals. The public increasingly trusted institutions rather than individual voices.

4. Radio and Television: Centralized Broadcast Culture



Radio and television intensified this trend. For much of the twentieth century, only a small number of broadcasters controlled the narrative. It took deep pockets to create a media company. Those who owned them got wealthier.

Television required expensive equipment and licenses. Production required studios, technicians, editors, and networks. Audiences became passive consumers and for the most part, they received their information without paying -- as the broadcasts were “over the air”. All the average family had to do was purchase a radio or television.

The tools of this era were large, expensive, and highly centralized:

- radio transmitters
- microphones
- broadcast towers

- film cameras
- television cameras
- editing suites
- recording studios
- satellites
- cable networks

This created enormous cultural power for broadcasters. Everyone watched the same news, the same advertisements, and the same events. There were fewer voices, but those voices had enormous authority.

Major broadcasters also felt a responsibility to appear impartial, credible, and serious. This was the period when modern journalism, as many people understand it today, became fully established. Large news organizations invested in reporters, editors, foreign bureaus, fact-checking, and investigative journalism.

Broadcasters wanted audiences to believe that they were not simply repeating rumors or partisan talking points. They wanted to be seen as trusted public institutions. Well-known news anchors became symbols of reliability.



Figures such as Walter Cronkite, an American broadcast journalist, built trust because audiences believed they were making a genuine effort to present the facts as fairly and completely as possible.

People often felt that if someone like Walter Cronkite said something on the evening news, it had probably been investigated carefully.

That trust gave broadcasters enormous influence, but it also created expectations.

Broadcasting also transformed entertainment, advertising, and visual storytelling. As radio and television grew, broadcasters increasingly needed:

- cartoonists
- illustrators
- graphic designers
- animators
- comedians
- script writers

- jingle writers
- voice actors
- set designers
- advertising copywriters

Media companies no longer sold only information. They sold humor, characters, spectacle, emotional connection, and visual identity.

This was another major turning point because information and entertainment became increasingly difficult to separate. During the Second World War, governments also began using film as a major tool of information dissemination and persuasion.

Movie theaters became one of the fastest ways to reach large audiences. Before the main feature film, audiences often watched:

- newsreels
- wartime updates
- patriotic messages
- government announcements
- propaganda films
- public safety films

These films informed people about battles, rationing, war production, enlistment, and the importance of supporting the war effort.

Governments discovered that moving images, dramatic music, narration, and emotional storytelling could be even more persuasive than newspapers alone.

The tools of wartime information film included:

- movie cameras
- film projectors
- newsreel distribution systems
- government film offices
- animation studios
- propaganda posters tied to film campaigns

5. Desktop Publishing and the First Great Democratization



For generations, if someone wanted a magazine ad, brochure, flyer, newsletter, catalog, business card, radio advertisement, or television commercial, they usually had to go to a specialist, such as a print shop, service bureau, public relations firm, advertising department, or production company.

These businesses acted as intermediaries. Most ordinary people and small businesses did not have the tools or expertise to create professional media themselves.

Then desktop publishing arrived. This revolution was closely tied to the rise of the personal computer.

Early on, professional publishing was largely associated with Apple Macintosh computers, which became popular with designers, publishers, and advertising agencies because of their graphical interface and strong support for layout and typography.

For many years, Macs were seen as the creative machines, while IBM-compatible PCs were associated with spreadsheets, accounting, databases, and office work.

In popular culture, the distinction became simple:

- Macs were for creative work
- PCs were for data work

That began to change as IBM-compatible computers became more powerful.

The arrival of systems such as IBM PS/2 computers gave businesses and individuals access to computing power that could support more advanced design, publishing, and office work.

Another major turning point came when companies such as Adobe developed creative software for Windows. Programs once associated mainly with Macs gradually became available to PC users as well. This widened access to creative tools dramatically.

Businesses no longer needed separate systems for creative work and office work. At the same time, companies began connecting departments internally through local area networks, intranets, shared drives, and office servers.

Creative departments, accounting teams, marketing staff, sales teams, and managers could now share files, layouts, advertisements, logos, reports, and customer information electronically.

Instead of outsourcing all creative work, companies increasingly built in-house creative departments connected directly to the rest of the business.

The key tools of this era included:

- personal computers
- laser printers
- desktop scanners
- Adobe PageMaker
- QuarkXPress
- Photoshop and Illustrator
- photocopiers
- fax machines
- desktop publishing software

Software and personal computers allowed people to create page layouts, ads, newsletters, brochures, and business materials from their own homes and offices. People started believing: We do not need experts anymore. We can do it ourselves.

At first, this shift was especially important for businesses.

Large corporations had long been able to afford advertising agencies, public relations firms, printers, designers, photographers, and production companies. Small businesses usually could not.

A local shop, contractor, restaurant, or family business often lacked the money to hire specialists for every flyer, brochure, advertisement, logo, or newsletter. Desktop publishing changed that.

For the first time, small businesses could create many of these materials themselves. They could design menus, flyers, price lists, signs, coupons, catalogs, newsletters, and advertisements from a back office or spare room.

This gave small businesses a degree of media power that had previously belonged mostly to larger corporations. It also marked the beginning of a larger shift in communication.

As businesses created more of their own media, they no longer depended entirely on newspapers, broadcasters, or outside agencies to tell their story. They could increasingly shape their own image, control their own message, and speak directly to customers.

This was one of the early beginnings of modern branding, public relations, and corporate messaging.

For the first time, an ordinary person with a computer and a printer could design a newsletter, flyer, business card, or even a small magazine without hiring a specialist. But many people discovered they could use the tools without understanding design principles.

The result was uneven quality, amateur-looking materials, overconfidence in software, and new demand for trained graphic designers and layout specialists.

Instead of eliminating experts, desktop publishing created a new generation of experts.

6. Websites and the Second Democratization



Before websites became common, the internet was mostly a network of connections rather than a visual space.

People used bulletin board systems, dial-up services, Usenet groups, email lists, FTP servers, and text-based services to exchange information.

Large corporations often had their own internal networks before the public web became widespread.

These systems connected departments, offices, warehouses, and employees through private databases, shared servers, and internal portals.

Employees might log into a company network to access documents, reports, schedules, inventory systems, or customer records.

In many ways, these private corporate networks were an early form of what later became intranets and web portals.

Long before most companies had public websites, many already had internal digital systems for sharing information.

Early internet culture was heavily shaped by hobbyists, universities, researchers, programmers, and technically skilled users.

In many ways, the early internet was closer to a giant library, message board, and file-sharing system than the visual web people know today.

For the first time, ordinary people could navigate information visually rather than through commands and text prompts.



Websites turned the internet into something visual, navigable, and much easier for ordinary people to use.

The same cycle happened again with websites. At first, websites were built by specialists. Businesses hired programmers, designers, hosting companies, and web developers.

The tools of the early web era included:

- HTML editors
- web servers
- FTP software
- graphic editing programs
- domain registrars
- browsers
- email newsletters

In the earliest days of the web, websites were often built by hobbyists, programmers, and technically minded enthusiasts. Early website creation required people to understand HTML, or HyperText Markup Language.

HTML was created by Tim Berners-Lee, “Inventor of the World Wide Web”, as part of the early World Wide Web.

Rather than being a traditional programming language, HTML was a markup language designed to organize and display text, images, links, and sections of a page. Much like COBOL or Fortran, HTML required users to type commands and formatting by hand.

Over time, software gradually turned HTML from something people typed manually into something people could build visually. Instead of writing every command by hand, users could increasingly point, click, drag, and drop.

This mirrored the earlier shift from command-line computers to graphical user interfaces. Website creation became accessible to a much larger number of people.

Then website builders arrived.

Online Shopping

Tools such as WordPress, Squarespace, Wix, Shopify, Blogger, and Canva made it possible for ordinary people to publish online without advanced technical knowledge.

Suddenly ordinary people could make:

- personal pages
- blogs
- business websites
- online stores

Again, people believed they could replace specialists.

Again, many discovered bad navigation, poor design, weak branding, broken code, and ugly layouts.

And once again, new professions emerged:

- web designers
- SEO specialists
- digital marketers
- social media managers
- UX designers
- content strategists

The tools democratized creation, but the complexity created new forms of expertise.

7. Online Shopping and the Commercialization of the Web



As websites became easier to build, businesses quickly realized that the internet was not only a place to share information. It was also a place to sell products.

The invention of online shopping transformed the web from a digital brochure into a commercial marketplace. Early online stores often required programmers, payment processing systems, inventory databases, secure checkout systems, and custom web design.

This meant that only larger companies could afford to build sophisticated online stores. Over time, platforms such as Amazon, eBay, Etsy, Shopify, and PayPal lowered the barriers.

Small businesses and individuals could suddenly:

- sell products online
- take payments electronically
- manage shipping
- track inventory
- advertise to customers
- create their own brands

This created another wave of entrepreneurial media. A person no longer needed only to communicate online. They could build an entire business around their website, blog, or social media following.

The line between content, advertising, entertainment, and commerce became increasingly blurred.

A creator could now publish information, build an audience, sell products, promote sponsors, and generate income all within the same platform.

8. The Monetization of Opinion



For centuries, people paid for information in one form or another. They bought newspapers, magazines, trade journals, pamphlets, and books.

But the internet introduced something different.

For the first time, ordinary people could build audiences around their personal opinions. Early blogs, message boards, forums, and personal websites allowed people to comment on politics, culture, business, sports, entertainment, and everyday life.

At first, much of this writing was done for free. Over time, however, a new idea emerged: if enough people pay attention to my opinion, perhaps I can make money from it.

Traditional journalism had generally separated reporting from opinion. News reporters were expected to present facts, while opinion writers, columnists, and editorial pages were treated as distinct categories.

The internet blurred that distinction.

People no longer had to work for a newspaper, magazine, or broadcaster to become influential. A blogger, YouTuber, podcaster, or newsletter writer could build an audience entirely around their own voice. In many cases, the opinion itself became the product.

People began paying not because the information was unique, but because they liked the way a certain person explained it. This created a new economy based on:

- commentary
- personality
- outrage
- humor
- analysis
- identity
- emotional connection

Modern creators often ask audiences to support them directly through:

- Patreon memberships
- Substack subscriptions
- YouTube memberships
- donations
- sponsorships
- merchandise

The challenge is that the internet trained people to expect information for free. Modern creators solve this problem by selling something beyond raw information. They sell:

- trust
- speed
- convenience
- personality
- curation
- belonging
- exclusivity
- emotional connection

People no longer pay only for information. They pay for who delivers it, how it is delivered, and how it makes them feel.

This has contributed to the rise of echo chambers.

People often choose creators who reinforce what they already believe. Instead of hearing one opinion supported by many sources, audiences may hear many opinions coming from the same trusted personality.

Modern creators are often rewarded for telling audiences what they want to hear. A creator who reassures followers, validates their fears, or repeats familiar beliefs may gain more subscribers, donations, engagement, and loyalty.

A creator who challenges their audience too often risks losing income and followers. This creates a subtle economic pressure toward repetition, confirmation, and ideological comfort.

Creators rarely survive on advertising revenue alone. Most successful creators build multiple income streams around the same audience. They may earn money from:

- advertising revenue
- sponsorships
- affiliate links
- Patreon memberships
- Substack subscriptions
- merchandise
- donations
- speaking engagements
- books and courses

In effect, many creators operate like small media companies. A creator's income often depends on keeping an audience emotionally engaged and loyal.

Trying something new, changing opinions, or challenging followers too directly can risk lower engagement, lost subscribers, fewer donations, and reduced income. The creator may become trapped between personal growth and audience expectations.

Traditional media organizations were not expected to have a single fixed worldview. A newspaper or broadcaster might lean politically in one direction or another, but it was still expected to investigate multiple perspectives, interview different sources, and present a range of opinions.

The goal was not always neutrality, but breadth.

By contrast, modern creators often build audiences around a more specific identity, theme, or worldview. Followers often expect consistency. The creator who built an audience around anger may need to remain angry. The creator who built an audience around optimism may need to remain optimistic.

Traditional media institutions were expected to show many sides of a story.

Creator media often succeeds by becoming one side of the story.

Over time, however, many legacy media organizations began to adopt some of the same dynamics.

As audiences fragmented and competition increased, news outlets increasingly leaned into specific identities, political positions, emotional tones, and target audiences.

Some organizations became known for a particular ideological viewpoint, while others defined themselves partly in opposition to their rivals.

In some cases, media companies began behaving more like creators.

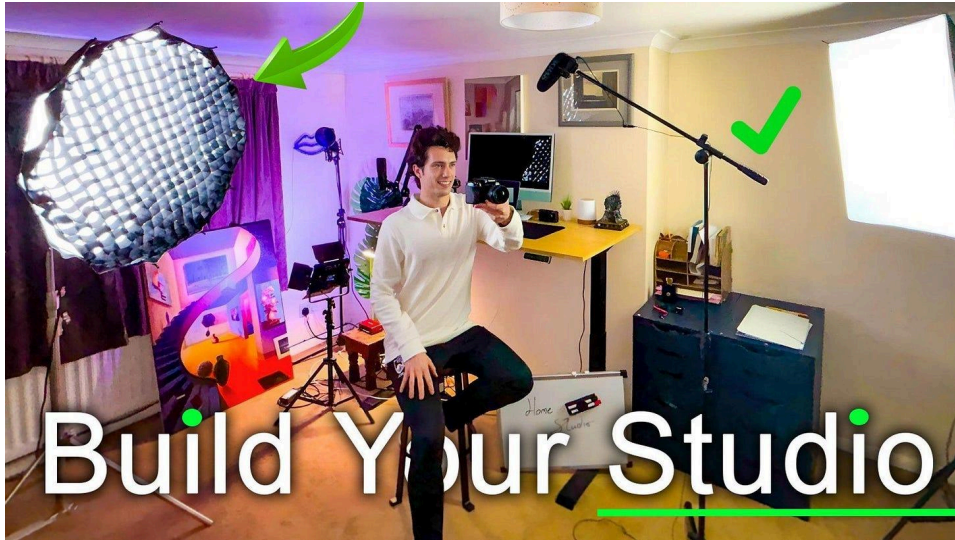
They built loyal audiences by reinforcing a certain worldview rather than presenting the broadest possible range of perspectives.

The pressure to hold audience attention, generate ratings, and compete in a crowded media environment encouraged many organizations to become more partisan, more emotional, and more personality-driven.

In this sense, the line between institutional journalism and creator media has become less clear over time.

Both increasingly compete for loyalty, identity, and trust.

9. The Miniaturization of Media Tools



Another major turning point in the history of information dissemination was the shrinking size of media technology.

For much of the twentieth century, media production required large, expensive equipment. Professional broadcasters used television cameras, film projectors, studio lighting, tape decks, soundboards, editing suites, satellite trucks, and radio studios.

Only large organizations could afford them. Over time, however, media technology became smaller, cheaper, and more portable. The transition happened gradually through:

- portable tape recorders
- camcorders
- cassette recorders
- home video cameras
- desktop scanners
- digital cameras
- laptops
- webcams
- smartphones

A process that once required a building full of equipment could eventually be done from a desk, then from a backpack, and finally from a phone in someone's pocket.

This miniaturization was one of the hidden forces behind the creator economy. A modern creator no longer needs a television studio, newspaper office, or radio station. They can carry an entire media company in a backpack.

Professional media tools gradually became consumer products. A teenager no longer needs a television network, recording studio, production crew, advertising department, or distributor.

Instead, they can buy a ring light, microphone, tripod, webcam, editing software, green screen, or podcast setup for a few hundred dollars or less.

The tools of media production moved from institutions, to offices, to homes, to backpacks, and finally to pockets.

Today, many of those tools are bundled into a single smartphone.

10. Social Media and the Rise of the Individual Brand



Social media changed the focus from organizations back to individuals. People no longer needed printing presses, television stations, publishers, newspapers, or web development teams. The tools of the creator era are astonishingly compact:

- smartphones
- video editing software
- podcast microphones
- ring lights
- social media apps
- YouTube channels
- Patreon and Substack
- livestreaming platforms
- Canva
- AI writing and image tools

Now a person with a phone can write articles, record videos, edit audio, publish photos, build an audience, sell subscriptions, run advertisements, and create a business.

The individual creator became a journalist, broadcaster, editor, marketer, designer, salesperson, and community manager all at once. Modern creators are essentially tiny media companies.

One of the biggest shifts in this era was the movement from institutional branding to personal branding.

Companies increasingly began speaking through individuals. The rise of the influencer changed how products, services, and ideas were marketed.

An influencer is essentially a person whose personality becomes part of the brand itself. A creator's face, voice, opinions, humor, style, and personal life can all become part of the product they are selling.

The human personality itself became a form of media.

11. A Larger Pattern: Democratization Creates New Elites



One of the strongest arguments in the paper may be that every tool that promises to eliminate experts eventually creates new experts.

Every major change in media tools creates winners and losers. New technology promises speed, convenience, lower costs, and greater independence. But it also disrupts older professions.

When new tools appear:

- some jobs disappear
- some skills become less valuable
- some businesses decline
- new industries emerge
- new careers are created

This pattern has repeated again and again.

The rise of printing weakened oral traditions and scribes.

Desktop publishing reduced the need for traditional typesetters and service bureaus.

Website builders reduced the need for simple web coding.

Social media weakened the power of advertising agencies, newspapers, and broadcasters.

AI is now beginning to disrupt writers, illustrators, editors, and designers.

People often fear these transitions because they see them as the loss of jobs. But history suggests that they are more often the evolution of jobs. Old forms of expertise disappear, but new forms of expertise emerge in their place.

The challenge is that the people who built careers around the old system are often left behind while the new system is still taking shape.

The tools become easier. But standing out becomes harder.

12. Where This Is Going Next



AI may be the next great media shift. Previous media tools changed who could create information. AI changes whether the information itself is real.

A printing press could spread a lie faster. A television network could present a biased story. A creator could shape facts around a worldview.

But AI can manufacture evidence itself.

It can generate fake photographs, fake voices, fake videos, fake interviews, fake articles, fake experts, and fake social media accounts. Because AI can do this cheaply and at an enormous scale, the amount of false information could become overwhelming.

The danger is not simply that people will believe false information. The greater danger is that people may stop believing anything at all.

If trust collapses, people may retreat even further into personalities, tribes, and echo chambers because they no longer know what else to rely on.

Pre-print culture relied on trust in individuals. Institutional journalism tried to build trust in organizations.

Creator culture shifted trust back to individuals. AI may now undermine trust in both. AI also raises major legal and ethical questions.

People can now use AI to imitate:

- faces
- voices
- writing styles
- photographs
- video footage
- music
- public figures

A person's likeness can be copied and reused in ways they never approved. AI can place words into someone's mouth, make a person appear to endorse something they never supported, or create videos of events that never happened.

This creates difficult questions about copyright, consent, privacy, identity, defamation, ownership, and authenticity.

Earlier technologies amplified human voices. AI can fabricate human voices.

This may be the first media tool powerful enough to democratize informational harm. The future may not belong to people who can create content.

It may belong to people who can create meaning, trust, taste, and coherence in a world drowning in content.

AI itself is not evil.

Like every media tool before it, it can be used to educate, illuminate, persuade, entertain, or deceive.

The true danger does not lie in the technology. It lies in the intentions of the people using it.

A printing press can spread truth or propaganda.

A camera can document reality or stage it.

A microphone can expose corruption or spread hate.

AI is no different.

The real question is not what the machine can do.

AI may be the most powerful media tool humanity has ever created.

Whether it becomes a tool for truth

or a weapon for deception will depend entirely on us.