



Transmedia Critical: Empirical Investigations into Multiplatform and Collaborative Storytelling

Introduction

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It was slightly more than 10 years ago that Henry Jenkins (2003) first introduced the conceptualizations of transmediality into the mainstream of contemporary media studies, but the related academic research and scholarly disputes had been taking place in various alternative and peripheral domains of media and cultural studies for several decades before that. There had been studies of intermediacy and intersemioticity, of intertextuality and multimodality; the domain of adaptation studies had become increasingly complex in terms of the rich terrain of intermedia textualities it found itself covering. And there had been Marsha Kinder (1991), who coined the term *transmedia* and approached the emerging phenomena of transmedia blockbusters from a critical viewpoint informed by various cultural studies and political economy approaches. Parallel to this work, the academic domain of audience research within media studies had been updated not only in terms of cultural studies' interest in the variety of everyday practices of sense making, use, and re-use of media content but also with regard to the changing affordances of digital textualities—of interactivity and participation, of remix and remediation—and how these affected the ways audiences formed, acted, and interacted. Discourses on the individuation of media experiences, with anonymous mass audiences making way to the self-aware choices of individual users and consumers, had taken place, and so had discourses on new opportunities for these individual users' collective action and democratic empowerment, their cooperating and gaining in influence by sharing their choices, coproducing content, and meta-communicating on all value propositions. That is,

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over the last two decades, there have been notable advancements in our understanding of the complexities of audience and user behavior.

It was against this backdrop that Jenkins (2006) introduced his argument on convergence culture and transmedia storytelling in his book *Convergence Culture*. Therein, Jenkins discusses the ongoing dispersal of media boundaries—between various media, between industries, between consumers and producers, and between those with power and those without. Although his background was in fandom studies, his proposal for new ways of multiplatform and participatory storytelling particularly caught on and provoked further discussion in other academic circles worldwide.

However, we want to emphasize that he was not alone. Several authors (with their own notions) contributed useful parallel discussions to the academic discourse on media convergence, intermediality, and new participatory media practices. Concepts such as cross-media (Bechmann Petersen, 2006), multiple platforms (Jeffery-Poulter, 2003), hybrid media (Boumans, 2004), intertextual commodity (Marshall, 2004), transmedia worlds (Klastrup & Tosca, 2004), and transmedia interactions (Bardzell, Wu, Bardzell, & Quagliara, 2007) are effectively part of the same conceptual domain and academic discussion. Yet, what makes Jenkins' work outstanding is that it was also noticed outside of academia. The media industry, first in the United States and then elsewhere, quickly picked up the transmedia concept to the extent that transmedia is now a household term in most media industries, especially in those of audiovisual entertainment. Transmedia storytelling as a concept and practice has become increasingly codified and deployed as a tool in international policy making and media management—the official professional credit of “transmedia producer” now exists in the United States, and various transmedia funding schemes and similar programs are now in place in the European Union (the MEDIA program and autonomous support programs in the member countries) and in other regions of the world. Jenkins himself has been busy cooperating with the industry not only in the United States but also, for instance, with Globo (Brazil), the largest mass-media group in Latin America. These intense dialogues between academia and the industry are significant because they are relatively unusual in our field, which should make us realize the timeliness of Jenkins' proposal and the explanatory power that his transmedia storytelling concept has had for various groups, including media professionals. It is therefore not insignificant that Howard Rheingold has called Jenkins “The 21st century McLuhan” (on the front cover of *Convergence Culture* [Jenkins, 2006]). This comparison reflects not only the importance of Jenkins' work but also indicates that Jenkins is listened to not only within the closed circuits of academia but also, like McLuhan, in the wider world.

We suggest that there is another great figure from our discipline's past who could perhaps provide another revealing parallel: Paul Lazarsfeld, who presented troublesome distinctions between administrative and critical research. Lazarsfeld has also been recognized for his original and insightful empirical work and for his fruitful cooperation with media industries. Yet, his work and much of the broader work on transmedia storytelling by his colleagues and sympathizers has been criticized because these transmedia conceptualizations are often celebratory and do not critically question the inherent values of transmedia practices in contemporary media industries. The more general critiques suggest that even in the more contested accounts on transmedia practices, analyses are generally confined to conclusions about the agency of media consumers (generally seen as strengthened) rather than how

media institutions or consumption practices fit into or are conditioned by the complex and always contested social and cultural settings of our contemporary everyday life (see Hay & Couldry, 2011, p. 481). Many have pointed out that the processes of media convergence are hardly linear or unidirectional and that outcomes in the form of converged industries, converged markets, or converged forms of media are frequently contested and unremittingly unstable. The various industry segments (that converge) are struggling to either gain or regain dominance and, therefore, the concept of the empowerment of media consumers should be constantly revisited to determine its historical specificity, situatedness, limits, and temporality.

In this regard, an interesting interlocutor of Henry Jenkins' could be Jesús Martín-Barbero (1987/1993), one of the main references in Latin American media and cultural studies. Although Martín-Barbero developed his theories in a very different media and cultural environment from Jenkins' world of transmedia storytelling and networked fans, it is possible to identify a series of theoretical comparisons between them. Their approaches are based on different oppositions (mass culture and popular cultures for Martín-Barbero, media industry and participatory culture for Jenkins), but both of them use these antagonisms as frames for analyzing the interactions and hybridizations that emerge from the complex network of relationships between the two broad opposing sides. Both recognize the complex interplay of relationships between mass industrial media and popular or collaborative cultures and note that it is impossible to reduce them to an irreconcilable opposition. However, it should be noted that Jenkins' approach is still more industry-oriented than Martín-Barbero's, whose theory centered on the interests of the Latin American subaltern classes. Some critics of Jenkins' proposal, such as Couldry (2011), have pointed out the difficulty of generalizing fans' and prosumers' activities to the rest of the audience. In this sense, Martín-Barbero's theoretical reflection embraces a broader social and political subject: the Latin American popular classes.

Our analyses of transmedia practices should therefore take a new step away from the general and unspecific acknowledgment of the empowerment of individual consumers and of the new creative and economic possibilities for the media industries and toward the analyses of historical and social circumstances that either enable or limit specific new practices, relationships, settings, and forms. We need to reinterpret transmedia as an important outcome and as a source of contemporary cultural and social complexities—not only as new forms of cultural texts and media institutions or practices but also as new forms of scarcity, inequality, and power struggles. That is, it is necessary to become explicitly concerned about all the manifestations of social power that have conditioned the emergence of transmedia practices and about the new forms of dominance that these practices may have enabled.

We also need to investigate the value that transmedia practices generate, focusing not only on internationally differentiated particularities of value creation but also on value as a multidimensional notion that could be interpreted by a variety of disciplines. We suggest that such objectives and rationales call for multisited and international empirical work inquiring into the regional specifics of convergence culture and the processes of transmedia production or consumption therein. What is more, because of the dynamic and multidimensional nature of the research object, such research strategies need to be interdisciplinary and to build on established research traditions such as cultural studies (with its interest in the complexities of everyday meaning making), political economy of media (with its interest in the

structuring of industries and markets, distribution of resources and in creation of value), media economics (with its empirical knowledge of media markets), and other and newer approaches within the studies of media, communication, and culture. The potential contributions by emergent domains such as cultural science (from work by Hartley, Potts, and others) and (trans)media archaeology”(Scolari, Bertetti, & Freeman, in press) should be kept under observation.

To work toward establishing transmedia studies as an international and interdisciplinary field of empirical investigations, a preconference was organized to take place before the annual conference of International Association of Communications in London (July 17, 2014). The objective of the preconference (titled *Transmedia Storytelling: Theories, Methods, and Research Strategies*) was to create an interdisciplinary environment for exchanging research experiences in the study of transmedia phenomena. The papers presented at the preconference originated, therefore, from various disciplines and research traditions and aimed to foster an interdisciplinary dialogue. Many papers discussed new research methods or empirical research results that questioned and critically engaged with the empirical facets of transmedia storytelling that are often celebrated but are little studied. The majority of the papers presented at the preconference are part of this special section of the *International Journal of Communication*.

The special section is broadly divided into three themes: The first is *transmedia production*. Contributors **Rosa Franquet**, **Maria Isabel Villa Montoya**, **Elizabeth Evans**, **Indrek Ibrus**, and **Maarja Ojamaa** have conducted a series of empirical investigations into different kinds of productions in European countries (an alternative-reality game in England, a major TV drama in Spain, and independent productions in Northern Europe) and discovered complex realities that cast doubt on some of the arguments about the economic feasibility of transmedia production. The second theme is *transmedia audiences*. **Nele Simons**, **Maren Würfel**, **Sarah Atkinson**, and **Daniel Pietschmann** (and his colleagues) have conducted methodologically varied investigations in different countries in order to understand the motivations and behavioral particularities of different kinds of transmedia audiences. The third theme is *transmedia archaeology*, in which **Matthew Freeman** and **Carlos A. Scolari** discuss various predigital forms of media and storytelling, arguing that transmedia, in terms of its participatory or commercial characteristics, can be understood as a notably older phenomenon than is often acknowledged. **Paolo Bertetti**, in turn, analyzes historical transmedia characters from a perspective that integrates semiotic and narratologic categories.

User/Audience Studies

The articles in this section discuss studies of transmedia audiences or users and reveal the diverse and distinct nature of users’ behavioral patterns in different contexts: in different countries, in different productions or media platforms, and in different age groups. All this undermines the sweeping and often rather optimistic generalizations on audience empowerment in convergence culture and the user-drivenness of transmedia storytelling. In this context, the article by **Sarah Atkinson** (“The Performative Functions of Dramatic Communities: Conceptualizing Audience Engagement in Transmedia Fiction”) in which she investigates the nuances and particularities of transmedia and interactive audience engagement is informative. By analyzing *The Inside*, an example of “advertainment transmedia” -an

experience that was released mainly on the social media platform Facebook for 11 days in 2011)- Atkinson demonstrates the multiple and diverse performative functions that the users as constituent members of a dramatic community can enact in a story. She focuses on audience engagements in Facebook and describes a number of important performative functions that could be conceived as the social-media-age equivalent of Vladimir Propp's (1928/1968) character functions. Atkinson concludes that audience members take on performative and narrative roles and that dramatic communities are sustained through the social activity and contributions and collaborations among all of the performative functions.

However, compared to social media's narrative modes and forms of engagement, TV-specific engagements may appear to be less oriented toward active participation in narrative fiction. This is demonstrated in the article by **Nele Simons** ("Audience Reception of Cross- and Transmedia TV Drama in the Age of Convergence"). Simons used a mixed-method approach with TV diaries, in-depth interviews, and focus groups and found that most people only consume marketing-driven extensions that do not contribute to narrative development and are not looking for a strong engagement with a fictional story world through transmedia extensions. She suggests that there is a conflict between the viewing motivations that TV producers perceive and the real viewing motivations of audience members: The producers expect the audience to be looking for immersion in a multiplatform story, but the audience is mainly interested in being entertained by TV episodes.

Within this context, **Maren Würfel** describes her empirical study of the appropriation of media content into the daily lives and identity building of German adolescents ("Transmedia Appropriation: Empirical Approach and Selected Outcomes from a Study with Young Germans"). She suggests that, on one hand, the range of convergent media offerings has considerable influence on the socialization and identity construction processes of adolescents—that convergent media enable young people to build their preferences and explore their chosen content more extensively and more intensively—but on the other hand, she suggests that "transmedia happens" as an outcome of such socialization practices. Whether the story is transmedially told (within the notion of transmedia storytelling in a narrower sense) or not, young people construct their preferred stories in a transmedial way, although to very different extents. Therefore, transmedia storytelling is suggested to influence socialization and identity construction in adolescence and vice versa—transmedia as a contemporary phenomenon should be seen as an outcome of these complex and often very particular processes.

Last, in their article "Limitations of Transmedia Storytelling for Children: A Cognitive Developmental Analysis," **Daniel Pietschmann**, **Sabine Völkel**, and **Peter Ohler** discuss transmedia narratives for children, which present several ethical dilemmas to media producers and parents alike. In their article, the authors analyze Disney's *Cars* transmedia franchise and discuss children's cognitive limitations and their relevance for transmedia narratives. Their article's original critical contribution is that there are important age-related differences among young audience groups that should affect the narrative structures and storytelling techniques that media companies use. They emphasize that content producers need to consider children's information-processing capabilities, memory capacities, attention spans, and language proficiencies to produce age-specific transmedia experiences.

All in all, the discussions of the behavioral patterns of transmedia audiences in this section indicate that further studies are necessary to analyze the diverse particularities of how modern citizen-consumers of various countries and age groups approach, use, and consume transmedia texts and how the complex interactions between audiences, texts, technologies, and institutions shape the evolution of contemporary media systems.

Production Studies

The articles in this section analyze the production aspects of transmedia content and can be understood to be involved in a close dialogue with the articles discussed above. While Simons concludes that audiences tend to be more interested in passive viewing of TV dramas as single-medium productions rather than in active participation in associated transmedia universes, **Franquet** and **Villa Montoya** ("Cross-Media Production in Spain's Public Broadcaster RTVE: Innovation, Promotion, and Audience Loyalty Strategies") demonstrate how in Europe a 360-degree cross-media production logic is what many TV institutions promote for various structural reasons. These authors studied the content and production processes of two fiction series, *Águila Roja* (Red Eagle) and *Isabel*, which were both commissioned and aired by Radio Televisión Española (RTVE), the Spanish public-service radio and television corporation. They demonstrate how transmedia extensions of these two series are closely linked to the televised plot and do not have significant narrative developments of their own. Instead of calling this practice transmedia storytelling, the authors refer to it as "enhanced television" or a "second screen" practice, which aims to simply offer more interactive possibilities and better access to the core content of TV programs. The main functions of these interactive extensions are to consolidate the content brand, to boost the television audience and to gain its loyalty, and to increase the traffic on its website. The rationales for this practice come partly from the core mission statements of TV-centric organizations and partly from the generally limited budgets in the age of austerity that do not allow investments into experimental online projects. The authors emphasize in addition that the organizational and production structures of TV institutions in Europe may also limit the attention given to online and transmedia output. They suggest that the organizational structure must be profoundly overhauled to ensure that the entire organization—not just the interactive media departments—is involved in developing coherent transmedia-like multiplatform productions.

The structural limits to transmedia production are also the focus of the article by **Indrek Ibrus** and **Maarja Ojamaa** ("What Is the Cultural Function and Value of European Transmedia Independents?"). They make a conceptual argument that the increasing attention the industry pays to transmedia and the related flourishing of such productions could ideally contribute to increasing dialogue, healthy cultural dynamics, and feasible cultural evolution in societies. Yet, after reviewing several empirical studies of transmedia production in (Northern) Europe, they demonstrate how the structural limitations keep this potential from being fulfilled. They explain that, unlike in the United States—where transmedia production practices are often driven by the market—in Europe's smaller markets, more often a specific combination of neoliberal public administration discourses on innovation and creative industries drive the investments into transmedia production. That is, these investments are made by public authorities who hope for national economic growth to partly derive from the scalable growth of small film and TV businesses as they converge with businesses in the IT and online-service sectors—transmedia developments are driven

top-down in these smaller countries in Europe. The authors demonstrate, however, that several structural limitations such as film artists' value systems or lack of training, saturated online content markets, or the lack of rights to share practices of public service broadcasters as major commissioners of transmedia content, will thwart hopes for quick and feasible growth for transmedia independents. Thus, the authors conclude that the public policies regarding transmedia production in these countries need new evidence-based revisions.

Last, as Atkinson's article describes the many functions and roles that the participants in interactive transmedia story worlds could enact, **Elizabeth Evans'** article "'We're All A Bunch of Nutters!': The Production Dynamics of Alternate Reality Games," in turn, demonstrates what the labor processes are like for those professionals who initiate and manage these kinds of story-world experiences. Upon analyzing the production in Nottingham, UK, of an alternative-reality game (ARG) titled *The Malthusian Paradox*, she points out the key professional skills, working attitudes, and relationships that eventually shape the development of ARGs' complex narratives. Placing her article in the currently emerging field of labor studies in the creative industries (advanced by David Hesmondhalgh, Kate Oakley, Mark Deuze, Mark Banks, Rosalind Gill, and others), she focuses on how flexibility, control, and trust were constructed and continuously reconstructed throughout the production process and how these aspects shaped the dynamics of the production team and the eventual outcome of their work. She argues that the emerging transmedia forms contribute to reshaping the working practices within contemporary creative industries and thus that it is necessary to examine further how work practices and labor processes are changing in creative industries with the rise of transmedia, multimodal, and longitudinal forms of storytelling.

Historical Studies

The article "Advertising the Yellow Brick Road: Historicizing the Industrial Emergence of Transmedia Storytelling" by **Matthew Freeman** suggests that although the process of spreading content across multiple media platforms has been associated with the recent processes of digital media convergence, this process may have a much longer history. By analyzing in detail L. Frank Baum's original *Wizard of Oz* story world and its promotional tie-ins, Freeman reveals how the industrial rise of transmedia storytelling can be recontextualized as a cultural product of early-20th-century modern advertising and the consumer culture that emerged at the same time. The article therefore highlights the importance of re-examining the neglected historical context of media convergence and transmedia phenomena therein. By emphasizing that transmedia storytelling was born out of advertising strategies, Freeman indicates that both of these phenomena grew concurrently as products of broader cultural shifts toward the rise of mass culture.

Carlos A. Scolari, in turn, argues in his article "Don Quixote of La Mancha: Transmedia Storytelling in the Gray Zone" that the second feature usually associated with transmediation, participatory storytelling, may have much longer historical roots than supposed. He analyzes a corpus of productions published in the 19th and 20th centuries in Spain that expanded the narrative universe of Cervantes' *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha*. These graphic productions were called *auques* and were situated in a gray zone between Cervantes' official narrative and user-generated content. They were low-cost commercial productions located on the periphery of the publishing industry of

the 19th century. Produced by small publishers, unknown artists, and not particularly skilled artisans, auques were far from the core business of the media industry and very close to the cultural practices of the popular classes. Scolari argues that auques were consumed, painted, cut, and used by the proto-prosumers of the 19th century. Therefore, instead of being unprecedented, the “hybrid economy” (Lessig, 2008) of the postindustrial era may be a result of a complex evolutionary process beginning with a variety of historical predecessors.

According to **Paolo Bertetti** (“Toward a Typology of Transmedia Characters”), a transmedia character is a fictional hero whose adventures are told in multiple media platforms, each one giving more details about the life of that character. There is no direct correspondence between transmedia storytelling and transmedia characters: In a shared narrative world, in fact, many characters can live and act, and every story can focus on a different one. This article reflects on the status of classic characters—from Charlie Chaplin’s *The Tramp* to *Goofy* and *Conan the Barbarian*—and proposes a preliminary typology of them.

Conclusion

The articles in this special section present a diverse picture of how transmedia textualities and practices of production and consumption emerge in contemporary media markets and cultures around the world. They historicize the practices that are sometimes celebrated for their newness by revealing their telling historical genealogies. They also demonstrate the diversity of interrelationships that media audiences and institutions may have and point out that the relative empowerment of individual users, media workers, or institutions is always circumstantially conditioned and contested. We propose that the intellectual work within this special section should be seen as a first step on the path toward more critically oriented but also methodologically and disciplinarily varied research into transmedia, which is unquestionably an important and perhaps even constitutional trend within contemporary media culture.

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