Introduction

Transmedia Practices: a Television Branding Revolution... and It's Just Getting Started

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Guest Editor

The television world is changing, having been impacted by mutations of three different natures: technological, narrative and participatory. Firstly, productions now use technology – and particularly online media – in the aim of enhancing their contents as TV series and movie franchises are, increasingly, basing their narratives on principles of narrative complexity (Mittell 2006) since active audiences do not only consume, but also engage with the said texts (Jenkins 2006). Efforts made by the industry to create these authentic universes in order to target involved audiences demonstrate how transmedia practices have impacted not only on storytelling processes, but the text – and the *brand* – itself, the latter not having the form of a mere programme with a limited duration anymore, but truly being a whole, a complete universe composed of numerous elements spread across media (Derhy 2013: 144). The goal of the different players involved is, nevertheless, quite different. While these fans' activities represent a way to empower themselves and use the tools at their disposal to similarly engage with and develop this desired universe, the teams behind institutional transmedia have a much less benevolent agenda in mind when dedicating money to build such immersive environments. Indeed, when it comes to the latter, offering more information and stories to the target audience is done with the intention of securing more (faithful) customers and, obviously, a higher financial return (ibid.). This has led to films and television programmes becoming brands on their own (see Johnson 2012, 143-66), thus changing marketing strategies in the film and television sector forever.

Transmedia storytelling, the one thing uniting all the aforementioned, is 'a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience' (Jenkins 2006, 95-96) and has now become common on an international scale. Although both a challenge and an opportunity for conventional industry production methods, it represents a marketing goldmine. Despite evidence of being used in early works such as by Lewis Carroll, with *Alice*'s world existing across books, poems and plays, or by L. Frank Baum and others on the *Wizard of Oz* universe, the expansion of such transmedia practices was clearly supported by technological advancements. As such, the rise of transmedia platforms – offering the possibility to create websites, mobile games, alternative reality games, interactive exhibitions, e-books, e-comics, webseries, and so on – and that of new media (Manovich 2001) have also played a role in audiences becoming increasingly participative (Boddy 2004, 106-7). All of this has compelled the media industries to reconsider production methods (Richards 2010, 181), which has resulted in a clear change towards transmedia strategies in the concept of narrative on a global scale, where stories attempt to reach the audience through an immersive environment and programmes/brands target consumers in a variety of ways. As such, transmedia storytelling practices have provided marketers with a whole new range of possibilities to boost both brand recognition and profits: rather than selling the show to networks, they now sell the story directly to consumers.

As guest editor of this special issue, and with regards to my interest in transmedia and television branding in general, my professional experience in marketing and in promotional, political, and institutional communication campaigns, along with my teaching experience on film and television, as well as marketing and communication, has provided me with complementary insight into marketing goals and practices. This has always pushed me to look at film and television production through a double lens, encompassing both the creative aspect and the industrial one. This is why, for instance, my PhD thesis – the research for which consisted in interviewing television practitioners – revolved around the industrial discourses of 'success' within the Anglophone, transatlantic television industry. One of the main goals of this research has always been to help bridge the gap between academia and the industry. It is for this reason, as well, that I am co-editing a collective work on both transmedia storytelling and fan-produced transmedia texts (or transtexts), entitled *The Rise of Transtexts: Challenge and Opportunity* (forthcoming). By focusing at once – through the work of both professional and academic contributors – on the industrial, artistic, social, marketing, financial and legal perspectives, as well as on audience participation, this work aims at discussing our understanding of transmedia texts from a variety of viewpoints, offering a more holistic approach than otherwise possible. Before having the idea for the book project, however, I already wished to tackle the topic of transmedia practices through both a narrative and branding angle, which is why I now present this special issue of *Networking Knowledge*, entitled 'Branding TV: Transmedia to the Rescue'.

A number of questions, based on the premise laid out above, will thus be tackled in this special issue. To what extent, for instance, have transmedia practices impacted on promotional and branding strategies? Is transmedia a cause or an effect of the global narrative and marketing changes discussed throughout? How has new media facilitated or popularised transmedia strategies by offering innovative tools and platforms to help create a much more immersive environment? What degrees and manifestations of audience engagement are emerging around these texts? More broadly, what challenges and opportunities are posited for the practitioners, the audience and academics? Finally, what role do notions of authenticity and authentication play as transmedia producers seek to forge links between different transmedia texts and secure their acceptance by committed audiences?

The creative (or cultural) industries – encompassing film, television, gaming and music – have the same purpose as any other industry: being profitable (Hesmondhalgh 2002, 3). As aforementioned, the transmedia strategies used by practitioners and their interest in engaged audiences are very much linked to monetary objectives. Specifically because these issues are not as theoretical as many might be in academic research, but very tangible and financially relevant, they should be tackled with an industrial outlook. There are a number of scholarly monographs and edited collections on transmedia. None of these, however, has really tackled the issues of authenticity and canonicity in transmedia extensions, one of the key points of *The Rise of Tranxtests*, which is also addressed here. Besides, most of the academic books on the subject appear to have a strong focus on just one or two aspects in particular, and have rarely mixed the narrative aspect with the marketing one. In fact, most have either looked at transmedia from an authorship perspective (Delwiche and Anderson 2013), attempted to explain how transmedia could enhance narrations (Evans 2011; Clarke 2012), the value of the media platform in the narrative process of transmedia storytelling (Scolari 2013) and the extent to which storytelling in the cultural industries has shifted due to technological advancements (Rose 2010). Others, finally, do discuss transmedia practices from several angles, but with regards to one text in particular (Stein and Busse 2012).

This special issue, composed of six pieces, was meant from the start to be multi-disciplinary, and features the innovative work of postgraduate and early career researchers from the UK and from France. The first article, by Leora Hadas discusses ABC's *Agents of S.H.I.E.LD* (*ABC Studios/Marvel Television/Mutant Enemy*, 2013-) and the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* to which it belongs, while focusing on cult writer's Joss Whedon's selection to take part in the *Marvel* universe, not only as the director of *The Avengers* (2012), but primarily on his involvement as writer-director on *Agents of S.H.I.E.LD*. As such, by arguing that the 'discourse of authorship operates as a guarantor of consistency and authenticity', the author builds on Elizabeth Evans' (2010) assumption about the importance of authorship with regards to cohesion in transmedia storytelling. At the same time, she addresses what has shifted most dramatically with regards to this cross-media storytelling practice, that is how the audience perceives these various transmedia texts in relation to the '*mothership*' and the canonical weight attributed to them. Indeed, the canonicity of certain transmedia text extensions is highly debated by active audiences. Far from simply being restricted to fan-text itself (which some, nevertheless, do consider as 'fanon' and even canon amongst themselves (see Stein 2006, 145)), these authenticity disputes can also revolve around texts produced by entities normally accepted as authoritative, such as the broadcasting channel and author/show-runner. Furthermore, by positioning Whedon as 'validating' the brand extension and serving as a key element holding the Marvel transmedia universe together, Hadas' unique article not only examines the role of the media creator in extending the transmedia brand, but also studies how Whedon's authorship potentially competes with the Marvel Studios brand itself.

Secondly, Mélanie Bourdaa, drawing on interviews with practitioners, argues that the premium cable channel HBO – known for its self-differentiating branding, such as its famous slogan 'It's not TV. It's HBO' – currently promotes its content by utilising transmedia strategies. In addition to positioning the channel within the current TVIII landscape, Bourdaa makes the link between HBO's focus on setting itself apart and remaining true to its reputation and the way it recently attempted to do so by using transmedia strategies. Looking at two ongoing HBO fantasy productions, namely *True Blood* (Your Face Goes Here Entertainment/HBO, 2008-) and *Game of Thrones* (HBO/Television 360/Grok! Television/Generator Entertainment/Bighead Littlehead, 2011-), the author seeks to understand how the pay-per-view channel promotes these programmes while, at the same time, expanding its brand in both the domestic and international television setting. Divided into two main sections, the article first analyses the transmedia strategies put to use in relation to the shows before turning to the author's interview with Mike Monello, Chief Creative Officer of marketing agency Campfire and creator of the said strategies so as to understand the manner in which such strategies were inserted into the broader promotional strategy of HBO. By allowing such a conversation to happen between academia and the industry, Bourdaa complements this issue's intention, and joins the growing list of film and television scholars who have a part in reducing the '"us and them" paradigm' (Cornea 2008, 118). Besides, by demonstrating through concrete examples how HBO has sought to immerse audiences in the programmes' story-worlds, not as a storytelling technique but as a marketing one, the author offers a rare industrial outlook on how transmedia storytelling can also be used in a typically promotional manner.

Erin Giannini then discusses how NBC's *Heroes* (Tailwind Productions/NBC Universal Television Studio, 2006-10) adopted product placement techniques as a response to ad-skipping and has attempted to 'to reconfigure how brand flow operates across multiple platforms.' In this innovative paper, the author goes as far as arguing that the inclusion of the said products, such as Nissan cars, goes beyond mere placement, but, in fact, incorporated such products into the storyline as actual characters, across a range of media platforms. Going back to the show's identity as a transmedia

text, Giannini subsequently examines how *Heroes* – the return of which has, in fact, just been announced for 2015 (Denham 2014) – has provided multiple 'points of entry' for active audiences. In doing so, the author develops the issue introduced in Bourdaa's article, by linking this storytelling characteristics of the programme to the way in which the NBC network has utilised the show's transmedia nature in a promotional manner. As Bourdaa demonstrates, this was done by coupling the older single-sponsorship model of US television with the latest technological advances, across multiple platforms. Finally, the author tackles how transmedia practices turned out to be both opportunities and challenges on the production and the narrative level.

Indeed, as I argue in *The Rise of Transtexts*, there exist a number of challenges and opportunities facing practitioners (as well as audiences and academics) in relation to transmedia storytelling and fan-produced transmedia texts. For industry professionals, for instance, these regard not only the production of transmedia texts – writing and marketing wise, – but also the way they consider both audience engagement and fan-produced transmedia narratives. For audiences, these challenges and opportunities relate to their engagement with and consumption of institutional transmedia texts, the production of their own texts, and their apprehension over transmedia extensions in relation to issues of authenticity and canonicity, as well as to legality and copyright. Finally, for the academics that we are, there are the added challenges of how to theorise, historicise and contextualise transtexts (both industrial and fan narratives) in connection with the socio-economical, but also cultural, geographical, legal and sometimes political context. With this article, Giannini offers concrete examples of certain of these challenges and opportunities faced by industry practitioners and scholars in addressing the place of transmedia in our times.

Matthew Freeman's article looks at the Warner Bros. *Batman* franchise and at its expansion in the early 1990s. In this last case study, the author uses *Batman* to explore how 'distinct versions of a fictional character', formed under different creative contexts and aimed at different demographics, illustrate the notion of brand convergence. This notion, Freeman argues, is crucial to the 'transmediality' of *Batman*, both from a commercial/industrial perspective – as a brand – and from a textual and creative one – working with a fictional storyworld. Also discussing the role of Tim Burton in reviving the franchise, which lead to its transmedia expansion, the author joins previously introduced discussions, such as those in Hadas' article, on the authorship role of Joss Whedon, and those of Giannini's, examining the links provided by transmedia between the storytelling and promotional practices. Subsequently arguing that the latter has 'converged past and present iterations in a way that mediated alternate audiences', Freeman explores the ways in which audiences are directed to wide a spectrum of texts. While retracing the different steps of the franchise's transmedia expansion, this article illustrates at the same time the notion of textual convergence and that of brand convergence, as well as how the two were facilitated, in the case of *Batman*, by the transmedia nature and development of the franchise. Finally, Freeman takes a controversial position by arguing that, in the case of the *Batman* franchise, transmedia practices operated 'as an effect, rather than a cause' of the larger marketing strategy aiming at both building and economically sustaining the *Batman* brand. As such, the author provides an alternative perspective to these very new discussions with regards to the place, role and involvement of transmedia practices with regards to branding in the cultural industries, more specifically, here, in the television industry in the past few years of this TVIII era.

Finally, journal editor Sam Ward provides an astute closing piece to the issue. After starting with a very contemporary case of transmedia branding for television, through a publicly displayed sculpture this time, Ward reflects on the methodological demands posed by the fluid nature of

television branding practices. This allows us, by acknowledging the relevant questions raised by the author, to carefully consider how to apprehend a research project from a conceptual standpoint. Such a reflexion, in turn, encourages us to think of new paths to explore in future academic research on both television branding and transmedia practices. Ward, then, goes on to illustrate my earlier point on the benefits of bridging the gap between academia and the industry, particularly from a scholarly perspective in this case. He concludes by linking the reason to apprehend branding and transmedia practices through a variety of perspectives with the intrinsic nature of such practices, which are 'interconnected with several […] spheres', most notably, in the case of transmedia, those of marketing and textuality.

Rather than reducing transmedia storytelling to the augmenting effect it had on the concept of narrative resulting from its ability to create an immersive environment, this issue seeks to discuss the wide range of economic perspectives available to a film or television brand due to this very immersive environment. The transmedia phenomenon has, so far, mostly been approached from an either textual or participatory standpoint, but rarely so from a multidisciplinary perspective encompassing the marketing aspect. Providing insight on this topic through contributions from researchers in media, communications, cultural studies and marketing enriches our collective understanding of transmedia practices thanks to complementary viewpoints, in the hope of offering a more holistic approach. In doing so, the various pieces presented in this edition clearly demonstrate that transmedia practices have revolutionised television branding… and that it's just getting started.

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