Transmedia Journalism as a Post-Digital Narrative

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Abstract

This paper examines the emergent entertainment and advertising technique of transmedia storytelling as a method for journalists to target their work to an increasingly dispersed public across an unlimited array of both digital and analog media. In doing so, I argue, journalists can better reach a relevant and decisive public with more engaging, complex and nuanced stories. I will examine the elements of transmedia storytelling, and discuss how different parts of its method have been used in two journalistic cases. I will conclude with a hypothetical example of how it might be used to fullest effect.
Introduction

“Our extended faculties and senses now constitute a single field of experience which demands that they become collectively conscious. Our technologies, like our private senses, now demand an interplay and ratio that makes rational co-existence possible.”

— Marshall McLuhan

Change is a principal subject in journalism. Journalists like me have always been eager to cover the revolution or institutional collapse that may result in a completely new world. Subjects like the Civil Rights Movement or the fall of the Soviet Bloc left the public on the edge of its seats wondering how the world would change. But as the second decade of the 21st century unfolds, we find ourselves covering not only the revolutions of the outside world, but also the institutional collapse of our own profession. We are on the edge of our own seats. The profession of journalism I grew up with and worked in for more than 20 years is confronting a public that is rapidly dispersing through a crowd of alternative content providers. They range from legacy media outlets to niches of special interest. The public is seeking customized, self-filtered news and a place in the journalism conversation. Journalists are scrambling for new ideas to meet these challenges.

With tremendous fervor, journalists and innovators have thrown themselves headlong into the world of digital technology in search of an answer. From newspapers streaming online video of breaking news, to impressive data visualization techniques, to mobile device feeds and social media outreach, this old profession already reaches out to its audience with new technologies. Most of those techniques are of great individual value. As use of mobile devices such as tablets and smart phones explodes, journalism pushes content there with ever-greater agility. According
to a Pew Research Center study (Mitchell, Rosenstiel, Houston Santhanam, & Christian, 2012) 33 percent of U.S. adults now get news from a mobile device. Further, they note, this audience consumes more news overall, both online and off.

However, I argue that though technology is at the heart of journalism's problems, looking for answers only in the digital world is shortsighted. The Internet age has certainly brought the journalist an ever wider array of options to deliver the news, but it also provides the public with an unlimited world of places to find its news. In its 300-year history, American journalism has rarely targeted its news-gathering work to the most relevant public, choosing instead to aim for enormous mass audiences. Transmedia storytelling, which distributes a story across multiple media forms and multiple media channels, provides a method tuned to the 21st-century mediascape to do exactly that. It provides a method for journalists to reach critical publics in a diverse, dispersed and dilettante mediascape, and embraces a structure to deliver more complex and nuanced stories that better fit the contemporary media environment.

Facing similar audience defections, the entertainment and advertising media are enthusiastically embracing this emerging storytelling technique that uses the advantages of new media, legacy media, audience participation and investigative curiosity. These on- and offline tools help find dispersed audiences and more deeply engage them. Fans of an entertainment franchise find the story not just in one medium — cinema, for example — but across an array of professional- and amateur-created content. A transmedia story unfolds not only through the aforementioned digital innovations, but also in traditional and nontraditional analog media. When done well, this technique has helped bring to film, television and music franchises an enduring involvement and commitment from their fans.
By adapting the methods of transmedia storytelling to journalism, journalists — either those associated with big legacy media companies, or small, collaborative groups of committed individuals — will better engage relevant publics, offer deeper and more valuable participation and interaction, deliver complex stories with deeper context and find the public in a dispersed, diverse and dilettante mediascape.

Contexts

From Marshall McLuhan (1995; 2003) through a score of media scholars and popular pundits (Castels, 2001; Davis, 1995; Donnelly, 1986; Jenkins, 2006; Levinson, 1999; Ong, 2002; Rose, 2011), we understand our move through the electric, electronic and digital ages as the Cambrian Explosion in the ecology of media. McLuhan understood media as extensions of our senses, expanding our interaction with the world beyond our immediate surroundings. Consciousness, he described, is the natural combined interplay of our senses working simultaneously to decode the world. “Knowing,” is a creative process of those senses working in unison. Before what he called “the electric age,” media as extensions of our senses were “closed systems” with each extension — the wheel, the alphabet, the printed page — unable to interact (McLuhan, 1995, p. 94). However the instantaneous nature of media in the electric age, in which information is conveyed in multiple forms at the speed of light, allows these extensions of our senses to interplay as our biological senses do. Consciousness, he argues, is extended far beyond what the digerati now call “meatspace” (2012).

Transmedia storytelling, I argue, is the embodiment of this collective extension of the senses, and embraces what McLuhan called a hyperconsciousness. If each medium, regardless of content, is capable of changing our perceptions and interactions, then each possible storytelling medium would engage our interacting senses differently. By expanding a story across media we
engage many sensory extensions. And if McLuhan's perception of consciousness is true, our minds would infinitely combine, recombine and rearrange story elements in a deeper process of understanding than would be possible through a single medium alone. “Psychologists define hypnosis as the filling of the field of attention by one sense only,” he said. “At such a moment ‘the garden' dies. That is, the garden indicates the interplay of all the senses in haptic harmony.” (McLuhan, 1995, p. 107)

Transmedia storytelling also embraces the differences varying media bring to the content they carry. As McLuhan (McLuhan, 1995, pp. 178–185) described, forms and channels such as print, radio, television and cinema mold our interactions and understanding of the content they carry. When these texts are combined the total can be greater than the sum of the parts. As he noted in an interview, “It means arranging various media to help each other so they won't cancel each other out, to buttress one medium with another.” (McLuhan, 2003; M. McLuhan, 1995) Media scholar Henry Jenkins describes this as “additive comprehension,” using a term he attributes to game designer Neil Young (Jenkins, 2006, p. 123).

Though the ideas behind it have been described with other terms, Jenkins popularized the term transmedia storytelling and has identified its structure as used in entertainment media (Jenkins, 2003; Jenkins, 2006). Jenkins explained fully in his book Convergence Culture:

A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best — so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction. Each franchise entry
needs to be self-contained so you don't need to have seen the film to enjoy the game, and vice versa. (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 95–96)

Through a series of blog posts, Jenkins further defined the technique by identifying “seven principles of transmedia storytelling.” (Jenkins, 2009a, 2009b) They include: Spreadability vs. Drillability, Continuity vs. Multiplicity, Immersion vs. Extractability, Worldbuilding, Seriality, Subjectivity and Performance. These principles are methods of engagement for a public, and would be used to inspire more than passive interaction with a story. Through an intriguing and complex story world, a public would be immersed deeply and be inspired to share interconnected and serialized stories told from multiple points of view. Individuals might investigate further by drilling ever deeper into story contexts. They may extract physical and emotional elements for their own lives, or choose to perform the stories themselves.

But what of the second syllable of the keyword “transmedia”? Media is an elusive term containing many definitions under its umbrella. Media scholar Joshua Meyrowitz includes media as language or conduit in his analysis (Meyrowitz, 1993). Narratologist Marie-Laure Ryan, in her quest to define a “transmedial” narratology for the digital age, classifies media as semiotic phenomena, technologies and cultural practices (Ryan, 2006, pp. 16–25).

In American vernacular use, the word media can be understood in at least four different ways, encompassing a hierarchy of ideas that may be conflated or contextually misinterpreted. The first idea the word contains is media as a sociopolitical actor. This is “the media” often seen as a truth-spinning influence on public discourse, or the “fourth estate” as understood by members of the press. Here Ryan's cultural practice definition applies. A second idea is media as family, such as art, advertising, news, music, literature and others. Meyrowitz would include these as language and Ryan as semiotic phenomena. However the two other ideas of media I find
critical to transmedia storytelling are *form* and *channel*. Media form fits Meyrowitz' discussion of media as language and Ryan's as semiotic phenomena. It is indeed the language of media used in telling a story, from text to audio, video, cinema, photographs, illustration and games. Media form is a structure that as both McLuhan (1995, pp. 178–185) and Ryan (2006, pp. 16–25) describe as influencing our perceptions and understanding of story. But these forms can be delivered across many different channels. Where media form is the language used in the story, media channel is a connection point with an audience. The *form* of text, for example, can find its public through *channels* such as books, newspapers, magazines, the Internet, film, television, graffiti and even sky writing. Ryan discusses these as technologies and Meyrowitz as conduits. Though the term conduit most closely fits what I am discussing, it implies a clean, unfiltered and nonpolluting pipe. I use channel here as it implies not a pipe, but a ditch or a riverbed that adds material to the flow or filters out elements. McLuhan (1995) would certainly argue that this idea of media also influences the message.

**The Post-Digital Narrative**

Media *channel*, I argue, is as important as media *form* in making transmedia journalism complete. Digital communication on the Internet and through mobile devices continues to expand, and this growth is an intriguing and very important part of transmedia storytelling. But over the last decade journalists have focused almost entirely on digital technology. That will continue to grow in influence in all communications. But transmedia storytelling in either entertainment or journalism embraces the Long Tail theory of Internet-age economics (Anderson, 2006) in which access to niche products increases with the size of the network. Though author Chris Anderson's popular work has been criticized through an examination of music sales (Orlowski, 2009), a key point is valid here: The Internet has dramatically increased access to
niche products, ideas and media, whether those products are digital or not. The diversification of communication that is proving so problematic for legacy mass media has also proven invaluable for niche media. Transmedia storytelling embraces the possibility of any media form or channel as a node in a story, and gains from their use.

Concurrently with my studies, Brazilian media scholar Denis Porto Renó, of the Universidad del Rosario in Colombia, has also examined transmedia in journalism. His work is founded on contextual research into the societal and communication changes giving rise to transmedia storytelling in entertainment. Through it he builds an interesting structure for a transmedia journalism story. His “Fluxograma Algorítmico Circular Rizomático,” or Circular Algorithmic Rhizomatic Flowchart, makes a simple visual reference to a few of the myriad possible interconnections between individual stories necessary in the effective design of a transmedia journalism project (Portó Reno, 2011a, 2011b; Portó Reno & Flores Vivar, 2012).

Porto Renó's experimental implementation uses the variations in the way we receive stories from diverse media forms, such as text, video and audio, and opens the journalistic process to citizen journalism in ways that match many of the principles of transmedia storytelling outlined by Henry Jenkins. However, his ideas are limited to digital mobile devices. Left out of his experimental implementation is a consideration of how diverse media channels — including analog channels — have been used in entertainment transmedia.

Jenkins himself has been critical of the “black box” idea of convergence represented today by mobile computing:

What's all this talk about ‘media convergence,' this dumb industry idea that all media will meld into one, and we'll get all of our news and entertainment through
one box? Few contemporary terms generate more buzz — and less honey… There
will never be one black box controlling all media… Media convergence is an
ongoing process, occurring at various intersections of media technologies,
industries, content and audiences; it's not an end state. (Jenkins, 2001)

Though mobile technology has progressed by 2012 beyond what Jenkins may have anticipated
eleven years ago, black-box convergence is indeed not an end state. In personal-computer-loving
2001 we could only imagine the wireless tablet computer. It would be an act of hubris on my part
to predict what media will look like in 2023. Jenkins was correct. Like any network-based
system, media convergence is a perpetual flux of recombinant forms and channels being shaped
by users as much as programmers (Castels, 2001, p. 28).

Today's multimedia mobile devices are impressive, delivering as many media forms as
the personal computer in a wireless package the size of a wallet. But, like the personal computer,
they are a single media channel with (generally) only one individual gazing at the screen. They
embrace a variety of media forms fully, but form is only half of the goal. Transmedia storytelling
in entertainment exploits a wide variety of media channels, both online and off, individually and
collectively experienced, virtual and physical (Jenkins, 2006; Rose, 2011). Despite our
fascination with the digital and its seemingly infinite powers, our public continues to exist in a
meatspace where we drive billboard-lined highways with the radio playing and wander city
streets covered with posters and chalked sidewalk messages. We stroll museums and galleries
and attend lectures. Our stories exist as much in conversation as they do in media. Journalism's
purpose is to foster conversation as well as to inform and enlighten the public. Transmedia
journalism should reach for publics on every media channel that is relevant to that story, from mobile devices to virtual reality systems to board games or even paper airplanes.

**Almost Transmedia**

A multimedia project at the dawn of Internet journalism seized advantage of many media forms and many of Jenkins' transmedia principles. For the *New York Times on the Web* in 1996, photo editor Fred Ritchin and French photojournalist Gilles Peress produced an interactive photo essay that would allow the reader to drill deeper into the story to see beyond the traditional presentation provided in a companion piece in the *New York Times Magazine*. The result, “Bosnia: Uncertain Paths to Peace,” was multilinear, multimedia and interlinked with contextual information. Ritchin described it in his book *After Photography*:

In our construction, readers would be required to size up the information presented, then take trips and side trips through photographs, text, sound, video, with the option of extracting themselves at any time from Peress' essay to go to one of the fourteen forums and participate in various discussions, as well as to consult maps, a bibliography, or a glossary. There would be a copy of the Dayton Peace Accords and links to large numbers of other sites and other archival material provided by the *Times* and *National Public Radio*. (Ritchin, 2009, p. 104)

“Bosnia: Uncertain Paths to Peace” (Peress, 1996) encouraged drilling for more information on and off the *New York Times on the Web* site, provided personal and diverse alternative viewpoints, and expressed itself across multiple media forms. “The intent was also to take advantage of the new strategies made possible by the Web — nonlinear narratives, discussion
groups, contextualizing information, panoramic imaging, the photographer's reflective voice —
rather than imitating a print-based essay.” (Ritchin, 2009, p. 102)

Building the site, Ritchin added, took months in order for photographer Peress to
contextualize, pair and arrange images for the nonlinear presentation. That was longer than he
had spent photographing it, Ritchin noted, and much longer than the two and a half days to edit
an eight-page New York Times Magazine piece on the same subject. The two analyzed the
photographs and information for every possible interpretation to help anticipate the many
possible orders of images the readers could find for themselves. The order of images had a linear
function, with previous and next buttons, but also had a link for “more.” Clicking on that link or
an image itself would upend linearity and take the reader down a new path. Selecting images
from a grid display encouraged a personal exploration of the scenes. Navigating the site made a
story personal to each individual reader. “It was not story-telling to the reader,” he said, “but a collaborative creation of story.” (Personal communication, 2011, April 20)

Discussion — a rarity in online journalism in 1996 — was designed into the site from the start, embracing the transmedia principle of public contribution to the story. Not only did the site feature 14 forums for public discussion, but four Internet terminals were installed at the United Nations in New York and two at The Hague to expand the discussion to those without Internet access in 1996. The forums were introduced by the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Madeleine Albright, CNN's Christiane Amanpour, Soros Foundations president Aryeh Neier and others. “Yet the discussion groups were quickly dominated by some of the most racist and vitriolic comments ever to appear in the New York Times,” Ritchin wrote (2009, p. 107). Pro-Serbian commentators argued their side of the story was not being adequately represented, that they were being vilified by the media, or that the New York Times had a pro-Muslim slant. Muslims compared the Serbs to Nazi Germany and Hitler's wish for lebensraum. “If 1 million Serbs had died in WWII we wouldn't be having this problem in Bosnia...” (Puljic, 1996). Ritchin concluded, “The discussion groups, despite entreaties for civility from former Times foreign editor Bernard Gwertzman, were so rampantly hostile that a reader could learn more from them than any news report as to how extensive, irrational, and personal the contested claims could be.” (Ritchin, 2009, p. 108)

In 1995 and 1996 the New York Times was ready to experiment. “I said that since the Web was new we should try something new,” Ritchin explained. He “gave them a list of ideas and this was one that they thought made the most sense — it was a transitional moment for them, and there was a certain openness that went along with it.” (Personal communication, 2011, April 20)
It was, however, the first and last of its kind at the *Times*. “It's strange,” Ritchin told me, “but I always thought of the Bosnia project as being a primitive example of what can be done, and all these other projects would follow that would push various ideas more deeply, as well as coming up with very different approaches…” He adds, “basically institutions are very slow to change — if someone else does it (independently) they can then point to its success and do something similar (or even publish the same project) — so another question would be why so few independents are engaging journalism, and the world, differently?” (sic)(Personal communication, 2011, April 20)

“Bosnia: Uncertain Paths to Peace” was nominated by the *New York Times* for a Pulitzer Prize in 1997. But as an entity only of the original *New York Times on the Web* and not the printed paper, it was ruled ineligible. Though it had a companion print piece composed of the same images, that piece simply repeated content rather than extending the story. The project's online presence expressed many transmedia ideas before even Hollywood had begun to engage them, and used a diversity of media forms. But limiting to that online presence reduced the project's innovative thinking, reach and audience to a single media channel.

One venerable name in journalism has long used an extremely wide array of media channels to deliver its content. The National Geographic Society is the publisher, not only of the 124-year-old *National Geographic* magazine, but also of three magazines targeted to children and students. Another targets world travelers. The Society has a vibrant book division and have for nearly a half century produced content for broadcast television and home video. In an age when many media companies were shedding cross-media properties, the Society launched their own cable television channel. They broadcast radio programming and offer audio podcasts. To
better immerse their public they have a brick-and-mortar museum and a bookstore from which you can take home books, magazines, atlases and maps, travel gear or reproduction artifacts from their story worlds. They offer a lecture series featuring their scientists, writers and photographers. If you want to go yourself, they offer guided destination travel. They produce fact-based games played on tabletops, personal computers and mobile devices (“National Geographic,” 2012). In companion with a 2012 magazine cover story on the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota (Fuller & Huey, 2012), the society let the subjects themselves tell their own stories through the Cowbird.com storytelling site (Huey, 2012). And their Web presence is not their principle media channel, but rather a hub that connects all of the above, adds content that doesn't appear in the others and includes content produced by the public. Their cross-channel reach is the best in journalism.

The National Geographic Society’s use of that array of channels does not fully express the possibilities of transmedia journalism, however. Rarely has it coordinated stories across media forms and channels. Without considering dates of publication, some of the society's biggest story worlds — such as climate change, the Vatican, or China for example — have been elaborated expansively across those channels. Each piece complements, rather than repeats, the others. But the society has historically used those channels to tell the interconnected stories years apart. For instance a video production of “Inside the Vatican” (Lipscomb, 2002) was released 11 years after a book by the same name, and the book (McDowell & Stanfield, 1991) came six years after the two original 1985 magazine articles (Fallows & Stanfield, 1985; Stanfield & Boswell, 1985). Their coverage of this cloistered city-state has included travel guides, maps, photo collections and more. A simple search of their site for “Vatican” surpassed the results limit of 999,
demonstrating that for the National Geographic Society it is a rich story world (“Vatican,” 2012). But it is evident that their use of varying media channels is a convenience and market opportunity rather than a coordinated transmedia storytelling effort. Former National Geographic director of photography Rich Clarkson, who oversaw the above magazine productions, noted that the various divisions are autonomous and do not typically engage in advance coordination of story distribution (Personal Communication, 2012, October 11).

Transmedia storytelling in entertainment certainly embraces serialization of stories, often over a period of years, as in *The Matrix* transmedia franchise¹ which unfolded between 1999 and 2003 through three movies, animated short films, games, comics, toys and fan interaction (Jenkins, 2006, p. 99). But that serialization is deliberately timed by producers and anticipated by an engaged audience. The National Geographic Society’s use of its media channels certainly extends the life of stories such as that of The Vatican. National Geographic stories also have a longer shelf life than most, as is attested by the basements and attics full of yellow-bordered magazines across the U.S. It is a perfect, if as yet untapped, set of media channels for transmedia journalism.

**An Ideal Case**

If “Bosnia: Uncertain Paths to Peace” rethought the journalistic narrative as a nonlinear, interactive and self-guided multi-form essay, and the National Geographic Society reaches across an incredible array of digital and analog media with its work, what would an ideal combination of the two ways of thinking look like?

Like the Bosnia piece and most of the story worlds of *National Geographic*, transmedia journalism lends itself well to reporting on such ongoing issues as immigration, climate change,
gay marriage or gun control. It could be used to document a local issue as well as a national one, but is perhaps less appropriate for the day-to-day news coverage of immediate events.

A transmedia journalism design would not need to use any particular array of media. The choices of form and channel must fit the needs of the story, and could be relatively few so long as each extends or expands on the work of the others rather than engaging in simple repetition across media. This expansion could be accomplished not only by a legacy media company using channel partners, but also, I argue, by a small group of independent journalists. Those independents could partner with media corporations as well as other independent media producers and publishers to produce an array of media forms and distribute on a variety of media channels. What follows is a discussion of possibilities built on the above research as well as a quarter century in the field as a professional journalist. I by no means intend to be prescriptive: Transmedia journalism allows for a virtually limitless array of media forms, channels, subjects and approaches. Possible arrangements of varying stories across media is also nearly limitless. Finally, as a journalist I am cautious about imagining stories before they are reported, but for purposes of this paper I will discuss hypothetical stories. I will use the story world of immigration as it is a complex issue that allows for discussion of a very wide array of media forms and media channels.

**Forms**

Media forms may include text, audio, video, photography, illustration (from “high art” forms to comics), interaction, maps, lectures, games and collected artifacts. Again, these forms work independently of channel. One form (such as text) may be delivered through a variety of channels (such as printed newspapers or the Web). All of the above may be produced for the
transmedia project by the professional journalist to the amateur contributor or the story subjects him- or herself.

Each form represents a story differently from the others. Text, the most venerable of news media forms, is particularly good at fleshing out contexts, examining the invisible, and making connections between subject matter where those connections are otherwise difficult to see. In our hypothesized immigration coverage, it might be best put to use reporting on the political maneuvering that underlies the national immigration debate, explaining the history of immigration to the U.S. and connecting this issue with others in the sociopolitical sphere. Text most often does the heavy lifting in journalism.

Audio is also a verbal medium and reasonably well-suited to some of the work above, but it usually lacks the luxury of length. Our attention spans with audio media may be shorter than with text as it must be heard in real time rather than read at a faster speed. Standalone audio is notable for its ability to paint a mental image as we hear sparse details and must mentally construct the rest of a situation. This activity arguably deepens engagement by allowing us to virtually enter a scene ourselves. Here character can be built simply through the voice of a subject and the emotion present in speaking. In our immigration story world we may use audio to let characters tell their own stories to allow the emotion of the tale to make itself felt. These stories can come from all sides of the national immigration debate.

Video tends to be a narrative form. Events unfold on screen in a predetermined order. A process is elaborated and illustrated within a classic narrative arc. Character is built through voice, the subtleties of motion in the human face and other nonverbal cues. We are innately talented observers of expression which fuels our judgement of individuals. Here, stories of
process are well told, from the story of a border crossing (legal or illegal) to the telling of the daily challenges of an undocumented resident. Interviews are also more nuanced when we hear a voice and see the slight and fleeting expressions in tandem, and here we have the opportunity for both reported story interviews as well as stories told purely in the words of the subject.

Still photographs, by contrast, show their strength in freezing fleeting moments. Once frozen we are free to stare at them interminably. A case in point is Eddie Adams' 1968 image of the execution of a suspected Vietcong terrorist on the street in Saigon (seen at right). We are forced to stare at the very moment of death, and once we have it in our memories we can rarely escape that image. In still photographs narrative can be implied within the frame by the actions and emotion shown, or constructed from an orderly presentation of discrete moments. The breaks between frames, like audio, allow us to mentally fill in the blanks in story or the lack of sound. A picture engages our imagination in ways video tends not to. In our immigration story world, still photographs would be valuable for freezing an array of fleeting moments, of an expression on a face during a decisive turn of events, or the actions within a moment of confrontation. We might also build ordered narratives that ask for more visual contemplation and a more lingering pace, where each discrete step of a process is frozen for our persistent gaze. Here, stories of law
enforcement fit well because their emotional and confrontational nature can be examined with a detail that is impossible to replicate in all the other forms.

Like a chameleon, non-photographic illustration can change style with the channel presenting it. This most ancient of communication forms was a mainstay of 19th-century journalism and holds promise for its ability to visually represent that which is inaccessible to the camera. It has traditionally been used to graphically visualize the interrelation of subjects, the relative importance of topics or budget items, or the statistics of the public sphere. Though the scores of images of the airplanes about to hit the World Trade Center towers in 2001 bluntly illustrated the ubiquity of cameras in the 21st century, some other subjects are more visually hard to reach. Graphic nonfiction (comic-like) forms have proven successful in this regard, with journalist-artists such as Joe Sacco who has published graphic nonfiction books on Balkan genocide and past Palestinian conflicts, all based on eyewitness accounts and interviews (Sacco, 2000, 2001). Using similar techniques, Josh Neufeld produced a book on surviving Hurricane Katrina through the stories of a handful of characters (Neufeld, 2007, 2009). Images explain in ways that words cannot, and in our immigration story world illustration could be put to work bringing history to the visual story. Here we could retell the stories of historical immigrations, of life in second-world-war internment camps, or the work of activists like Cesar Chávez. Based on historical documents, remnant photographs or interviews, the stories can be as ethically rigorous as any other journalism form. And when our eyes see illustration, I argue, we naturally parse them as what they are — a careful-if-subjective reconstruction.

Interaction is a key to transmedia storytelling. Our publics gain a rightful sense of ownership in a story when they contribute to it meaningfully. As was illustrated with National
Geographic's engagement with the Lakota people at Pine Ridge through the Cowbird storytelling site, subjects have much to tell of their own lives. What is important to a subject or a reader may escape the investigation of a journalist, and allowing voices from outside can, when done well, bring more complexity and nuance to a story as well as add balance and needed transparency to the journalism process. With this form immigrants, officials, border dwellers and many others could have a say in their own representation. When presented collectively, opposing voices could help break the cycle of exploring only media that confirms one's own beliefs.

Interactivity is also frequently used along with the graphical illustrations of statistics and relationships discussed above. The ability to explore statistical information by drilling into, rearranging or manipulating those relationships engages our mind on both visual and structural levels. Two intriguing examples come to mind: the Washington Post’s “Top-Secret America” (Priest & Arkin, 2010) project illustrated the complex interrelations of U.S. security agencies through a drillable online graphic. The New York Times also represented the results of the 2010 census with a detailed interactive map of the statistics (Bloch, Carter, & McLean, 2010). With similar techniques we could build a better understanding of the issue of immigration through census numbers, immigration estimates, government budgets, public opinion, maps of the terrain of the stories and other data visualizations.

Interactivity is not exclusive to digital spaces. Lectures or live forums by journalists are an old media form. Mark Twain regaled audiences with tales from his days as a journalist, and John Reed lectured around the country to audiences curious about the Russian Revolution. For 65 years the Conference on World Affairs (2012) at the University of Colorado has featured many journalists among its hundreds of daily panel discussions. When engaged with an issue like
immigration, we are curious about the personal perspectives of the visual and verbal reporters working on the stories, as well as from the subjects and players within that story world. To the public a lecture holds the promise of personal insight not offered in other media. Lectures and forums are also communal events where the public participates in a shared moment of engagement in a distraction-free setting where words will be spoken by the lecturer or forum participants in a singular way. The experience is unique to the crowd in ways that recorded media cannot be. Our immigration lectures may feature not only the journalists' views, but those of the subjects. Forum formats where opposing perspectives are debated or deliberated would also offer engagement not available through other media.

The immersion of the public is a long-sought state in any media, including journalism. Like Hollywood producers we hope our publics will lose themselves in our stories, if only momentarily. Immersion also comes from experiencing the story personally. Two immersive journalism projects created by USC researchers Nonny de la Peña and Peggy Weil illustrate this possibility. In one, participants virtually experience interrogation stress positions (de la Peña et al., 2010) and in another people literally participate in the shock of seeing someone slip into a diabetic coma in front of them as they wait in a virtual food bank line (Personal communication, 2011, April 7). The technology of immersive environments is not readily available to most journalists yet, as the systems are complex and expensive. But parts of our immigration story could easily conform to that model, from virtual reality representations of suffocating in a tightly sealed truck bed to Wii- and Kinect-like motion capture systems that would immerse participants in a world of stooped onion picking under a hot Western sun.
Games are also immersive as they engage our sense of agency, and place us in an active role in the story itself. Our avatars become participants in a virtual representation of a story and can determine that story’s outcome. Games are particularly good at illustrating systems. Players personally experience how all the moving parts of a story interact to generate an outcome. An intriguing example includes “Cutthroat Capitalism,” a game created for Wired (Smallbore Webworks, 2009) in which players take on the role of Somali pirates. Players must secure a boat and crew, choose a ship to attack, how many hostages to take and how to dispose of them, either through ransom or killing. The game illustrates the system that is Indian Ocean piracy and the interactions between elements there, and creates an understanding of the pirates' side of the story quite different than one from interviews with the pirates themselves. It also appeals in part because it is a bit naughty. Like any media form, games should be intrigue a consuming public. Bad guys intrigue like no other kinds of characters. Games in journalism can also be as factually and ethically based as any other medium in journalism. A journalist's attention to the facts can make these immersive systems as journalistically sound as text. In our immigration story world there are many systems, from those of the process of legal and illegal entry into the country, the patrolling of borders, the under-the-radar existence within the country. Many of these areas might be assembled into one game in which the player could take on those various roles. He or she could be the legal immigrant battling through the complex process of visa and green card applications or the illegal immigrant arranging border crossings and dodging through the desert. He or she could choose the role of border patrol agent or Minuteman Project member to try to stop the illegal migrations — good guys and bad guys are relative to the players own opinions here, and living the oppositional role would be both intriguing and deeply insightful. Scores
could be based on such real-world factors as crossing success, income remitted to the home
country, or immigrants captured or deported.

Last on this list I include collected story artifacts, though the end of this list is not the end
of media form possibilities. Artifacts, like the religious relics of the Middle Ages, provide a
physical and personal connection to the story. In 2010 the International Center of Photography in
which period photographers Robert Capa, Gerda Taro and David Seymour shipped their
negatives from Spain out of France on the eve of the Nazi invasion in 1939. It was rediscovered
in Mexico in 2007. At its 2010 exhibition I looked relatively briefly at the scanned and printed
images from the film in the suitcase hanging on the walls, but I stared into the glass case holding
the suitcase and negatives themselves for nearly an hour. We are compelled by and attracted to
artifacts like nothing else. They can represent a physical connection to a story's characters or
events on a personal level that other media forms cannot reach. As journalists we often collect
artifacts for ourselves while reporting a story — I have shelves of things from bits of rock to folk
art to personal photographs given to me by subjects. With attention these things can be collected,
borrowed or bought to create displays that embody a story. These items illustrate what Walter
Benjamin described as the “aura of the work of art” present only in the original and not in the
reproduction (Benjamin, 1968, p. 221). In our immigration case original items could include
displays of ‘the things they carried' on their migration, spiritual items, fake documents, arrest
reports, or letters from home among many possibilities.
Channels

If each story has its best media *form*, then each public has its best media *channel*. In a multimedia age these media forms can be delivered or reproduced in a single digital channel like the Web or a mobile device. But as noted above, the Web and mobile, despite being multimedia spaces, are only single connection points with an audience. There is usually only one person in front of all those media forms, and consumers of a certain media company's products may be of a narrow demographic.

In transmedia journalism the media channel chosen provides access to a different key audience and a different possible entry point for them into the story world. Well-structured media channels can feed into and off of each other, sending an engaged reader from one story to the next. In legacy journalism the media channel was never a consideration. Newspapers, magazines, television and radio each delivered their news through their own single channel. The channel was inseparable from the product. The story was (and largely still is) owned by the channel itself. News was pushed out to the broad world with the hopes that the citizenry of the democracy would make responsible use of it. Little opportunity was available and little effort made to target groups who could specifically act on information or change the course of society. We simply cast a wide net into the public sea. Contemporary journalism has simply spread this idea to the Web and mobile in an act Marshall McLuhan would call gazing in the “rear-view mirror” rather than looking forward into the space new media has created (Levinson, 1999, pp. 173–186; M. McLuhan, 1995, pp. 211–216). Rather than creating for these media, legacy journalists are simply adopting them as second or third channels for their old-media material. They still fail to consider where they can find a new public. The question journalists can now ask is, “What is the
right public to reach with this story?” Rather than wide nets that fish in vast seas, sometimes we
should be dropping a few well-placed lines with good bait.

If story content and media form are our bait, then media channel is the fishing line. Those
lines may include legacy media like newspapers, magazines, radio, television (both broadcast
and cable), books and DVDs, as well as less traditional journalism channels like public lecture
series, game systems or game-oriented Web sites, graphic nonfiction magazines and books,
museums and galleries. Channels may include the more experimental such as public projections,
pamphlets or buttons, billboards or anywhere else a story may be told. Social media is a powerful
tool for stories to spread as fans share them on their feeds, but these channels have been used to
tell the stories too. Though many legacy media companies can and may choose to pursue a story
such as ours, I choose to imagine this from the point of view of the independent journalist. A
small team of independents working at high quality would have access to publication in major
legacy media as well as alternatives such as museums, lectures, game consoles or comic books.

**Stories as a Network**

In designing a hypothetical project I might consider placing the following stories in this
array of channels:

If our project had a keystone story at all, it might be investigative coverage of current and
proposed government policy. This kind of story is usually most thorough as text and is well
complemented by links to off-site documents and information as well as drillable interactive
graphics that might display public attitudes, arrests and enforcement, population data and kinds
of laws on the books. This keystone may or may not appear first in the series of story
publications. But what is the public that wants or needs this information and where do we reach
it? This story could be perfect for legacy news outlets that reach both public officials and likely voters. It might best reach our target audience through a print and online journal like the *New York Times, Washington Post*, or *Wall Street Journal*. If the wish is to most directly reach policymakers, then *U.S. News & World Report* may be the best here. Whether this is considered a keystone of the project, other stories across media should feed diverse publics back to the keystone. Network effects (Benkler, 2007) would increase the value of all the interconnected stories for both producer and public.

At the center of all the issues in this story world is the act of immigration, both legal and illegal. Here I imagine a pair of parallel stories, one following the process of legal immigration to the U.S. and another of an illegal entry. The best media forms here include video or an essay of still photographs. The choice would depend on whether there are discrete emotional moments worthy of the stare that stills allow. Either would present well the classic narrative arc inherent to these stories. In terms of channel, video may be most effective as it can be presented both on the Web and through broadcast and cable television. Though its numbers are declining, television has the broadest reach of all news media (Keeter, 2012). It finds audiences that print, Web, mobile and other channels may not. In our elaboration of the two processes of immigration, we could choose television networks or affiliates that reach publics who are less familiar with those processes, and we could reach a new public that would hopefully feed back to our context piece above in print or online.

In our immigration story world there are innumerable compelling profiles or vignettes of characters, from the immigrants to the social workers to the vigilante groups prowling the U.S. Mexican border. These stories make very compelling audio as we hear the story as delivered by
the person who experienced it. These stories could be broadcast by news radio networks like *NPR*, *Pacifica* or *PRX* so long as they are produced to their standards. Radio has the distinct advantage of reaching commuters in their cars or others performing myriad tasks while they listen. If missed over the air, podcasts are an increasingly popular way to delay attention to a compelling radio story. They, too, with interstitial announcements, could feed back to a central Web hub for the project or directly to interconnected stories on other media.

Closely related to the profile is a self-report by subjects themselves. This work, unfiltered by a reporter and perhaps produced collaboratively with an editor, would add transparency to the project, granting opposing voices the opportunity to rebut any perceived oversight or opinion from the producers. These pieces can be used as adjuncts to any of our media, as responses or followups, but compelling native spaces for them might be the confessional channel of *YouTube* where they would both fit and bring that public to the story. If they are as valuable and compelling as I imagine they might be, a forum, panel or lecture involving those subjects would add another media channel to our project that embraces the excitement of a singular event, fleeting in time, shared by other members of the public and completely unfiltered.

Detainment and deportation are ever-present processes in this story world. Here we have a process of discrete emotional moments that make this story a natural for still images. Still images in series work on many media channels, and here we could make use of a medium not engaged yet. If our text-centered pieces are at home in online and print newspapers, then these stories may mate well with magazines. This might mean national news magazines, but could also, and perhaps more effectively, include local magazines and alternative press to again find an audience as yet untouched by our efforts. Even if the publication we chose is small and local, few
lack a Web presence that would add an avenue for a nationwide public to continue their exploration of our stories.

One increasingly difficult task for news producers is reaching young people. According to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press report “Trends in News Consumption: 1991-2012” (Keeter, 2012) almost a third of people under 25 engaged with no news content on the day before they were surveyed. However, the same report notes that more people under 25 played games than watched TV news. If we built the games discussed in the previous section we would want to distribute them on channels where game players would come across them natively. Channels for our digital games include sites such as Steam, a public game storehouse by game maker Valve, and online marketplaces for console games like Xbox and Playstation. Tabletop games like board and card games may be distributed through a Web channel, but once ordered or purchased they escape the confines of that Website and become a new social channel for the story. In entertainment transmedia story worlds, alternate reality gaming is also a common channel for the game form. Played by masses of individuals as complex scavenger hunts or elaborate games of tag, alternate reality games have attracted millions of players and observers to franchises like Batman: The Dark Knight (Rose, 2011, pp. 10–13). With appropriate forethought, journalism games could adopt this channel as well.

Another alternative media channel for news is graphic nonfiction. Here our story (or stories) on the history of immigration to the U.S. could be told in concise visual form, with characters brought to life in a transparent manner. As above these stories should be delivered to the native audience for graphic nonfiction, be that in book or magazine form, or on the Web.
Style is important here. Story structure should be factual and historically solid, but the work should be compelling to comic book readers.

Another ever-present element to our story world are the borders themselves. This story holds great promise for still photographs or multimedia (stills, video, audio and graphics) delivered in nonlinear fashion inspired by “Bosnia: Uncertain Paths to Peace.” This story could not only illustrate the appearance of these places, but also demonstrate through nonlinear interaction how goods, populations and ideas feed across the porous line. The nonlinear and interactive elements would need to appear digitally, through Web or mobile apps. But an expansion of this story — the landscape itself — lends itself to gallery or museum walls. Like most immigration stories, the story of the border landscape has been done visually before (Allard, 1971; Lo Scalzo, 2006), but many are no longer very accessible. It is a story
that should not be left out of our project. Preferably, prints of these images would be displayed in
culture and history museums around the country, and paired with physical artifacts collected
from the scenes themselves — discarded cloths and refuse from migrants, signs, newspapers,
border patrol badges and spent firearm cartridges. In conjunction with an exhibition, a lecture,
forum or panel could be held to draw a public interested in conversation about the story.

Once the public has been engaged with the story, an effort should be made to enable story
linking through social media. We can widen the audience beyond those who find our work on
their own. Still image stories like ours on the border or on immigration process could be serially
distributed on photo sharing sites like Instagram and even Facebook. Headlines, teasers and
story abstracts could be written using language compelling enough to inspire both a read and a
share. And fully-fleshed social media channels for the project should be in place to promote it
directly to fans and to announce new serialized segments or media as they appear.

Though centralization is by no means necessary to transmedia journalism, we could
connect all the above media channels with a project Web site. Rather than the single-channel
hosting of most journalism, this hub would simply be a central link to the dispersed media
involved in the story. Many more media possibilities could be added as wished, from meatspace
alternate reality games to billboards, virtual reality systems or public image projection. Our tasks
are to research the potential audiences and learn where in a complex mediascape to find them.

Conclusion

Though the Internet age has sprung many surprises on the world of journalism and left it
scrambling for new ways of reaching its public, the communication structure it has created is a
gold mine of possibilities so long as our thinking stretches beyond traditional media ideas. We
cannot hammer a 20th-century peg into a 21st-century hole. The structure of the Internet era demands new methods of telling stories. Entertainment and advertising media are approaching that task through transmedia storytelling across both digital and analog spaces. Transmedia journalism is post-digital in that it looks beyond our current fascination with online or mobile worlds. It embraces them but does not depend on them alone. Transmedia storytelling can also bring in the complexity and nuance that legacy journalism did not often have space for, and reach publics in surprising places.

Any veteran journalist will tell you that a story is never finished; it is only abandoned. In the 21st century we are free of the space- and time-based constraints that gave form to 19th- and 20th-century journalistic style. We can now decide when to use that polished brevity or expand our work into appropriate new forms and spaces. We can give the public what before we may have been forced to leave out.

Notes

1 In his 2006 book, *Convergence Culture: Where old and New Media Collide*, Henry Jenkins extensively examined The Matrix franchise as a seminal transmedia story, designed as such by its authors. As Jenkins is credited with naming the form, perhaps The Matrix is the type species of transmedia storytelling.

2 The Minuteman Project is an anti-illegal-immigration activist group that patrols the U.S.-Mexico border. The controversial group has been criticized across the political spectrum and described as a vigilante organization. Their voice in the issue of immigration has proven newsworthy.
References


