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Foreword: Transmedia storytelling and free labor

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TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING AND FREE LABOR

Toby Miller

It's a great pleasure to write some prefatory words to this collection. My remarks represent my sense of future directions that might aid our understanding of transmedia storytelling and encourage justice and democratization in how it works. I mostly leave commentary on the book's compelling contents to its editors.

I can say this: *The Rise of Transtexts* is a real advance on previous work. It addresses commercial as well as amateur uses of transmedia storytelling, and pays heed to the steely eye of intellectual property in addition to the romantic gaze of troping fandom. I have learnt a great deal from reading these fascinating chapters. Here, I want to provide some history, psychology, and political economy to help understand such practices.

The apparently iron laws of genre have always been malleable.

Telling stories across media—and with an eye to doing so—is venerable, as Denzell Richards’ chapter acknowledges. Oral storytelling traditions had corollaries in song; both quickly made their peace with printed and recorded versions; and the typewriter has expanded its reach from letters, novels, poems, and journalism among elites and their amanuenses to be part of everyday life for billions of people around the world via telephone keyboards.

Novels have long been written and edited with a view to being optioned as screenplays; television programs have had books, toys, and clothes tied-in to them as merchandise since the beginnings of serial drama; Broadway plays were knowingly penned from the '30s as future movies; and so it goes. Most importantly of all, the huge cultural warehouse of TV, the world’s most popular medium, continues to tell stories across platforms.

Intertextuality is everywhere and paratextuality a norm, even as intellectual property is constantly seeking to secure territory. When

I wrote my study of *The Avengers* (the 1961-69 British TV program), I examined it as a television series, an industrial product, and the object of fan interpretation on-line and elsewhere. I uncovered decades of transmedia fan fiction about the series, from zines to family enactments and projections, and of course an abundance of corporate merchandising that both borrowed and added to the series, from men's trousers to women's caps, from novelizations to pop songs, from board games to radio shows (Miller, 1997).

I also received threats from pictorial rights holders. They loved the free attention given to their product thanks to my book, but reserved the right to change tack and sue my ass if their estimate of the ratio of cost to benefit they obtained from my work should alter. Chapters by Jennifer Jacobs Henderson and H el ene Laurichesse in this collection traverse such terrain more conceptually and less threateningly than this anecdote manages!

Beyond the history of narratives across varying media lies a pressing contemporary question: in moving rapidly between platforms, genres, and sites in order to tell stories, how *good* and how well-informed *are* those stories, and those involved in telling and reading them? Aside from aesthetic evaluation, we don't have many tools for answering that query. But we do have some psychological ones, which point to the deskilling effect of much-vaunted mixed-media/multi-platform/transmedia participation.

The science available is largely educational, and it shows that cell phones at school or university, for instance, have a negative impact on learning. For 'low-achieving and at-risk students,' banning their use is 'equivalent to an additional hour a week in school, or to increasing the school year by five days' (Murphy and Beland, 2015). And college? Cornell's renowned "Laptop and the Lecture" study, published in 2003, showed that lecture attendees remembered lessons better if they did not use laptops during class. Lots of research in the decade since has confirmed the risks of

technological multitasking with smartphones and the value of note taking with pen and paper rather than digitally—and not only for those doing so; others get distracted by people typing in ways they do not when surrounded by old-style note taking (Hembrooke and Gay, 2003; Sana *et al.*, 2013).

And the research shows, counter-intuitively, that people who engage heavily in media multitasking are worse than others when given multiple tasks to do. Sending texts and engaging with social media seriously diminish these capacities, and learning in general (Lawson and Henderson, 2015; Gingerich and Lineweaver, 2014; David *et al.*, 2015; Ophir *et al.*, 2009).

You can draw your own conclusions as to how relevant this may be for transmedia storytelling—no-one has investigated the topic in this way, as far as I can tell, apart from the military and a few qualtoid true believers (Raybourn, 2014).

What of political economy? More than half a century ago, Dallas Smythe explained that audience attention—presumed or measured—was the commodity that commercial broadcast TV stations sold to advertisers (2004: 319-20). Since that time, political economists of the media have used his foundational insight to criticize the way that corporations exploit the free labor of fans, while recognising the active interpretative and creative work of audiences.

This little box may surprise people who have been misled to think that the left allows no room for audience creativity or fan production:

In the 1950s, Smythe wrote: ‘it is important to understand that audience members act on the program content. They take it and mold it in the image of their individual needs and values.’ He took it as read that soap-opera *habituées*, for instance, sometimes viewed the genre as fictitious and sometimes as a guide for dealing with personal and social problems (1954: 143, 148). Smythe saw no necessary contradiction between this perspective and political economy. Similarly, in his classic 1960s text *Mass Communications and American Empire*, Herbert I Schiller (1969) stressed the need to build on the creativity of audiences by offering them entertaining and informative media. And at the height of

Armand Mattelart's 1970s policy interventions in revolutionary societies, from Latin America to Africa, he recognized the relative autonomy of audiences and their capacity and desire to generate cultural meanings alongside the need to democratize access to making texts (1980). Even Max Horkheimer derided '[t]he stereotyped rejection of television' by those who considered themselves above it; their arrogance 'highlights with special clarity the impossibility of turning the clock back,' because 'flight into the past is no help to the freedom that is being threatened' (1996: 140). And Theodor Adorno recognized that the best way to draw mass acclaim was to attack the mass media—that manipulating one's audience by denouncing audiences as vulnerable to demagoguery is itself an old demagogic trick (1972: 72).

From the other side, as it were, the best active-audience and uses-and-gratifications people have always been alert to the value of political economy. Consider the work of Ien Ang (1982 and 1991) within cultural studies, or Lawrence Wenner from the social sciences (Rosengren *et al.*, 1985 and Wenner, 2004).

So I want to argue that transmedia and fan creativity are not new, that they may not encourage learning, and that they are ripe for exploitation. We are seeing more and more forms of these expressions, for example via *narco* genres, most notably

narcorrído (“10 Narcocorrído,” 2015) and *narco noir* (Aguilar García, 2011), and militarization, in ways that may be creative but problematic (Miller, 2012).

We are also seeing evidence of corporate appropriation, as this book explains. For example, on-line sites that replay television programs and films use ‘geo-filtered access logs’ to identify audiences. These are measured each day, alongside confessional testimonies by potential viewers—if you tell us about your life and practices of consumption, we’ll tell you about programs that may interest you. Google’s YouTube has Video Identification software developed with Disney and Time Warner. It tracks copyrighted materials on the site, following the history of each uploaded frame to spy on users and disclose their internet protocols, aliases, and creative practices to corporations. The software permits these companies to block or enable reuse of texts, depending on their marketing and surveillance needs of the moment. YouTube has thus become middle-aged media’s valued ally, tracking intellectual

property and realising the culture industries' paradoxical dream of engaging in product placement each time copyright is infringed on line, while learning more and more about their audiences (Miller, 2010).

Marketing likes nothing better than active audiences who are bursting with knowledge about media texts; nothing better than diverse groups with easily identified cultural politics and practices; nothing better than fine-grained ethnographic and focus-group work to supplement large-scale surveys that provide broad-based demographic data. PriceWaterhouse (2015) offers specialist advice on how to exploit the 'super-fan,' who invests time and money on global media as no one else in what has become key 'incremental revenue' and can lead to cheap promotion to others. It recommends '[h]arnessing the most passionate advocates' via various forms of participation that make them feel special and lead to their service as unpaid marketers.

Can fans, academic or otherwise, be said to resist labor exploitation, patriarchy, racism, and US neo-imperialism, or in some specifiable way make a difference to politics beyond their own selves when they interpret texts unusually, dress up in public as men from outer space, chat about their romantic frustrations, or produce their own media across technologies and genres?

I am cosmically ambivalent about transmedia storytelling. It can embody the exciting multi-point production and distribution that was attempted by unionists and socialists in the early days of radio (Johnson, 1988). But it can simply be another means of corporations and states using the talent and interest of readers to commodify their labor and exploit them and others (Maxwell, 2015; Curtin and Sanson, 2016; Oakley and O'Connor, 2015).

As is always the case with new technologies, genres, and social relations of work and play, dystopic and utopic antimonies abound. In the popular realm and within state- and corporate-endorsed

research, the utopic side seems to be triumphant. I hope some room is left open to ambivalence and dystopia as well.

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