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New Paths in Transmediality as Vast Narratives: The State of the Field

Matthew Freeman

This chapter aims to provide a theoretical contribution to contextual understandings of narrative ecosystems. It does so by unraveling some of the industrial practices, conceptions, uses and cultural understandings of the contemporary transmedia phenomenon. This chapter in fact positions transmediality as in some ways key to understanding the ever-expanding and evolving nature of the various television series examined later in this book, and so I will here detail the overarching similarities and differences between transmediality as an overarching critical approach and the more specific narrative ecosystem perspective. I also explore the strengths and weaknesses of transmediality in the context of analysing vast serial narratives.

Specifically, this chapter delves into the conceptual nuances that underpin transmediality as a system, highlighting its value in analysing the production, distribution and consumption of vast narrative structures. It is here where I shall then establish the specificities of the narrative ecosystem approach, which keeps together a wide range of heterogeneous factors – accounting for evolutions from text to context – which I use to underline the evolutionary potential of vast narrative formats across multiple media platforms. This pronounced link between notions of transmediality and/as models of narrative ecosystems essentially means understanding the deeply intertwined relationships between media texts, industries, technologies, production, audiences, and culture, and between evolving practices and concepts such as marketing, branding, storytelling, and intertextuality. But how does such a deeply intertwined relationship actually work in research terms? More importantly, what does it mean to analyse such complex textual-industrial-contextual relationships as ecosystems?

Thinking Transmedially

As argued in the previous chapter, and as indicated elsewhere by Brembilla and De Pascalis, thinking of story world as a narrative ecosystem is particularly useful when one addresses media convergence and narrative spreadability. It may account for all the aspects involved by crossmedia narrative production, without erasing the specificities of each product configuring the ecosystem. Crucially, just as the proposed narrative ecosystem approach considers the narrative as a complex network based on the interactions among various elements, so too does the notion of transmediality, which broadly describes, as Elizabeth Evans defines, ‘the increasingly popular industrial practice of using multiple media technologies to present information concerning a single fictional world through a range of textual forms’ (2011, 1). More specifically, transmedia storytelling – itself a smaller category of transmediality – concerns the telling of ‘stories that unfold across multiple platforms, with each medium making distinctive contributions to our understanding of the [story] world’ (2006, 334). In other words, transmediality is become closely tied to conceptions of vast narrative and integrated ecosystems via the construction of a storyworld across multiple media platforms.

Important to this thinking is the way that Dudley Andrew understands storyworlds to be intertextual structures that persist across multiple texts across media and afford many stories to unfold and many characters to roam: ‘The storyworld of [Charles] Dickens is larger than the particular rendition of it which we call *Oliver Twist* ... In fact, it is larger than the sum of novels Dickens wrote, existing as a set of paradigms, a global source from which he could

draw' (1984: 55). In some ways, the ability to somehow build a fictional storyworld across multiple media is arguably the root of the perceived complexity or sophistication that lies at the heart of so much scholarly literature on transmedia storytelling. Jenkins has argued that transmedia storytelling – 'the art of world-building' (2006, 166) – immerses audiences in a story's universe, providing a comprehensive experience of a complex story' (2003). Echoing this idea of a 'complex' or vast story structure, Carlos A. Scolari insists that transmedia storytelling's 'textual dispersion is one of the most important sources of complexity in contemporary popular culture' (2009, 587). In essence, and according to Tim Kring, the creator of *Heroes*, the nature of transmedia storytelling – and thus world-building – is 'like building your Transformer and putting little rocket ships on the side' (Kushner, 2008).

Yet what differentiates a basic storyworld that exists in any story from the process of world-building across multiple texts and media is the way that the spatio-temporality of a given storyworld becomes expanded across media by using those additional media forms to add new aspects of world mythology, or to expand the timeline of the storyworld to include new events, or to explore new fictional settings, etc., in ways that allow audience to indeed consider the narrative as a complex network based on the interactions among various elements. And this process is nothing new. For *The Lord of the Rings*, for example, J. R. R. Tolkien penned entire backstories spanning thousands of years of fictional history, even naming the forests and rivers while developing new languages for the inhabitants of Middle Earth. Across this text, its appendices, and its predecessor story *The Hobbit* (1937), Tolkien expanded the timeline of this storyworld, narrating earlier or parallel events that occurred in the background or tangentially to the primary story. Even earlier than Tolkien, around the turn of the twentieth century authors such as L. Frank Baum were making use of emerging developments in new printing technologies and in modern advertising – such as the related rise of branding and comic-strip characters in newspapers to extend the fictional storyworld of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) across multiple media platforms (Freeman 2016a).

Such transmedial world-building activity worked to carve a vast narrative, with key pieces of this fantastical story and its characters dispersed systematically across the likes of comic strips, theatre and cinema, as well as via maps and other paratextual documents, indicating the point that, as Mark J. P. Wolf states, the act of building storyworlds is 'transmedial in nature' (2012, 68). More to the point, the building of transmedia storyworlds is really about the folding in of text with paratext. Jonathan Gray's concept of the paratext – itself a kind of intertextual form found in the fuzzy threshold that exists between and around the textual storyworld and the inter-textual cultural or promotional spaces around that textual storyworld – lies in between products and by-products, between ownership and cultural formation, and between content and promotional material. Consider the Harry Potter storyworld as a case in point. To promote the film *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows – Part II* (2011) (i.e. the text), Warner Bros. created faux Facebook pages for a number of the film's characters, publishing paratextual snippets about the spells these characters have learned. These paratextual items exist simultaneously as both text and as promotion – at once operating to increase promotional awareness of the film while also working to develop the audience's understanding of the rules of magic and mythology that govern that particular storyworld.

Thinking, then, about transmediality as vast narratives has led key scholars to stress the importance of seriality in accounting for the role of each part of the larger story. For as Jenkins observes, 'transmedia storytelling has taken the notion of breaking up a narrative arc into multiple discrete chunks or instalments within a single medium and instead has spread those disparate ideas or story chunks across multiple media systems' (2009). Serialised media

forms such as prequels and sequels are thus adopted in transmedia stories so to build characters across multiple media, guiding the audience from one medium to the next.

However, it is important to nuance the complexity of how seriality underpins cases of transmedia storytelling. Ben Singer defines seriality as that which ‘extends the experience of the single ... text by division, with the selling of the media product in chapters’ (1990, 90). But in some sense, Jenkins’ definition of transmedia storytelling is in direct opposition to seriality: ‘Each [textual] entry needs to be self-contained so that you do not need to have seen the film to enjoy the game, and vice versa’ (2006, 98). Rather than operating as a process of selling serialised chapters, then, and as I have previously argued elsewhere, ‘transmedia storytelling is perhaps better theorised as either a strategic or an emergent/contingent form of *expansive intertextuality* – using things like characters and their components to link stories together, offering audiences new added insights into characters in ways that constitute a sequel or a prequel, and doing so by quite often switching from one character’s point of view to another as one moves from one medium to another’ (Freeman 2016a, 25-26). Still, how does one actually account for the role of such expansive intertextuality in research terms? And as was questioned right at the start of this chapter, how can transmediality work as a theoretical tool for analysing and understanding storyworlds as textual-industrial-contextual ecosystems? In some ways, answering this question means turning to the concept of brand.

Brand

Indeed, much current research in the field – particular that which comes from a media industry studies standpoint – points to the role of brand as a way of understanding the links between industrial or corporate activity, wider paratextual meaning and that which occurs on the level of text, i.e. in terms of story and character. In that sense, the notion of the media brand – traversing industrial, paratextual and textual phenomena – has been useful thus far in allowing researchers to account for the role of multiple pieces of text across multiple media.

John Caldwell argues that media branding, much like transmediality, has emerged as a central concern of the media industry in the age of digital convergence’ (2004, 305). As Catherine Johnson continues, ‘programmes are now being constructed as brands designed to encourage audience loyalty and engagement with the text beyond the act of television viewing’ (2012, 1). Considerations of branding in this context work to evoke what Jenkins also calls brand extension, ‘the idea that successful brands are built by exploiting multiple contacts between the brand and the consumer’ (2006, 69). For Jenkins, this too ‘should not be contained within a single media platform, but should instead extend across as many media as possible. Brand extension builds on audience interest in particular content to bring them into contact again and again with an associated brand’ (ibid.). Following this logic, there is a distinct slippage between the concept of brand extension and that of transmedia storytelling. In fact, the precise industrial means through which transmedia storytelling occurs has considerable overlap with the concept of branding, for to maintain brand recognition across a range of media texts and products itself requires a sense of textual or visual coherence across these products so as to ensure that each indeed feels like it fits with the others. In other words, both transmediality and branding are conceptualised in terms of extensions of branded content across as many media as possible – working together via textual and paratextual factors to ‘produce a discourse, give it meaning, and communicate it to audiences’ (Scolari 2009, 599).

So how can branding be used as a theoretical lens through which to trace a storyworld as a narrative ecosystem, one that may account for all of the aspects involved in the transmedia

narrative production? Let's consider the Star Wars storyworld for a moment, and in particular the way that branding can be seen to account for the links between the branding of Disney's Star Wars adventures, their narrative trajectories, and the meanings of the larger Disney brand image. For despite the enormous shift in Star Wars' ownership patterns in recent years – the property bought from Lucasfilm by Disney in 2012 – there are now deep synergistic overlaps between the brand identities of Star Wars as a world and Disney as a corporation that allows us to make sense of this storyworld and its ownership as a brand ecosystem.

In the broadest sense, for instance, Disney – which for Betsy Francoeur (2004, 1) is 'one of the most visible and successful examples of corporate and brand image building' – has created and sustained a global brand identity built on a few core ingredients. And for Bruce Jones (2010), Director at Disney Institute, 'the overriding theme of Disney is magic.' Indeed, when a focus group was asked to list the words that came to mind when thinking of Disney, by far the most frequently mentioned words were 'fun', 'magic' or 'magical', and 'family' (Winsor 2015, 24). Each of these three descriptions equally apply to Star Wars, with its brand identity built from the fun of the matinee film serials of the 1930s, the magic of the storyworld's mythological and mysterious Force, and the narrative emphasis on family relationships and conflicts derived from its soap opera heritage. Disney's stories have also characteristically focused on heroic journeys, overlapping with the *Star Wars* film saga by foregrounding hope, courage, and friendship as key to lost, isolated people who all must gradually find their place in the world – be it Cinderella, Aladdin, or Luke Skywalker.

Looking even closer, there is a clear emphasis on nostalgia at the heart of the Disney brand identity. Tom Boyles, Vice President at Disney Parks, for example, says that 'Disney's core promise, the simple idea on which it was launched, has not changed since Walt Disney made clear that it was to create happiness through magical experiences' (quoted in Adamson 2014). Nostalgia – defined by Grainge (2003) as a kind of 'mood' interested in conveying a knowing relationship with the past and manifesting as a yearning for an irretrievable and previously cherished past – is crucial to Disney's brand, a fact that has manifested itself in the wider Disney-owned Star Wars texts across multiple media as a focus on what Star Wars once *was*, not what it could be. In effect, both the Disneyland theme park and Disney's Star Wars comic books – the latter described by reviewer Tracy Brown (2015) as 'a series very much for fans of the original trilogy by reuniting Luke, Han, Leia, R2-D2, C3-PO and Chewbacca' – are places where 'age relives fond memories of the past' (Jones 2010).

Indeed, there is the sense that Disney has effectively tied the future of their own Star Wars world with nostalgic ideals of its past, infusing its own brand messages of nostalgia and mystery into the textual narrative fabric of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015) itself. Nostalgia, firstly, plays out in both the textual and paratextual material of *The Force Awakens* – specifically in terms of the film's approach to world-building. Principally, the film features the return of the original trilogy's main characters – Han Solo, Leia Organa, Chewbacca, C-3PO, Luke Skywalker, etc. Moreover, much of *The Force Awakens*' pre-release publicity focused on the return of those original characters, not to mention an emphasis on practical sets and effects that were more in keeping with the cinema of the late 1970s and 1980s:

It was really important, that the movie, in a way, go backwards to go forwards. This was very much about new characters and a new story ... but I wanted it to look and feel the way the original trilogy did – which is to say, when I saw those two droids in the desert of Tatooine, that was real (J. J. Abrams, quoted in Kaye 2015).

By correlating the practicalities of realness with the return of going backwards and revisiting old sets of characters, *The Force Awakens* thereby promoted the idea that the original films – their characters, stories and cultural imprint – are akin to nostalgic legends to be yearned for. Importantly, too, this brand characteristic of nostalgia can be seen to characterise the wider transmedia strategy concerning how Disney has gone about constructing its wider Star Wars universe across multiple media. Let's briefly trace, then, how this nostalgic yearning for Star Wars' past glories manifests in the actual stories of things like comic books and novels.

The aforementioned Disney-produced *Star Wars* comic book series, for example, which commenced publication in 2015, exemplifies this nostalgic branding approach. The *Star Wars* comic is set directly between the events of *A New Hope* (1977) and *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), focusing once again on original characters such as Luke, Leia, Han, and so forth. Alongside the flagship comic book are spin-off mini-series comics based on the characters from the original trilogy, including *Darth Vader*, *Princess Leia*, *Lando*, and *Chewbacca*. Disney's other *Star Wars* comic books also travel back even further in time to the days of the prequel trilogy, such as in *Obi-Wan and Anakin* (2016), which is set between *The Phantom Menace* (1999) and *Attack of the Clones* (2002) – essentially blending Disney's *Star Wars* into the original *Star Wars* brand via the intertwining of nostalgic story events.

The *Star Wars* case study demonstrates the value of brand in accounting for both corporate strategy and textual representation as integrated strands of a reciprocal narrative ecosystem. We can see how Disney has attempted to apply the core ingredients of its own brand identity – foregrounding long-standing ideas of fun, magic, family, and particularly nostalgia – as the overarching transmedia strategy for its *Star Wars* world, intricately tying the economics of its branding methods to the textual fabric of the stories themselves in the way of an ecosystem. But the lens of branding is nevertheless limited in this regard, since it has the tendency to emphasise large-scale and arguably sweeping industrial-paratextual-textual correlations rather than to fully account for all of the aspects involved in a transmedia production. As such, emerging research in the field indicates the value of analysing audience specificity.

Audience Specificity

Indeed, the contemporary media industries may be thinking transmedially so as to engage their audiences across multiple platforms, but it is not enough to assume that the creation of a coherent brand, narrative or storyworld is enough to explain the specificities and the reasons for why audiences choose (or choose not) to engage in transmedia activities – nor how and why multiple pieces of text and paratext integrate together as mutually enriching sites of a narrative ecosystem. Elsewhere I have argued for the need to comprehend audiences' desires to migrate across multiple media platforms not solely in terms of notions of brand, story, storyworld, or even character, but rather to acknowledge the fact that many audiences base their decisions to cross media on values and themes (Freeman 2016b). This way of thinking is highly important in terms of narrative ecosystems, too, since to understand the relationship between multiple parts of an evolving, connected, transmedial narrative world, one also has to assess the relationship between said narrative world and the consumption or participation of its audiences. And thus moving into the field of fan studies, such focus on audience specificity builds on Matt Hills' (2015) idea that transmedia fandoms operate as unique 'communities of practice', and also reflects Paul Booth's argument that 'board games can communicate transmediate pathos better than they can transmediate narrative' (2015, 69).

Let's consider the case of Captain Marvel for a moment, a character that debuted in Marvel Comics in the 1960s and has since appeared under a multitude of aliases and in multiple media forms. According to wide-scale online survey made up of over 200 of the character's fans conducted by myself in 2015, the Captain Marvel fan community understand the relations between the various iterations of the character across the likes of comics and television not according to the apparent lure of interconnected stories or world-building, but instead according to a much more layered transmedia ethos based on cultural alternativism. By 'transmedia ethos', I indeed mean the idea that audiences may choose to follow beliefs, values, themes, philosophies and meanings (rather than stories) across media, and by cultural alternativism I really mean an emphatic sense of alternativism to mainstream media cultures.

The case of Captain Marvel paints a rather complex picture in this regard, at least in the sense that Jenkins' almost utopian notion of a single narrative world that captures the attention of its audiences and directs those audiences across additional texts and media is challenged. The narrative ecosystem, that is, is fractured into silos, occupied by different corners of fandom. Although the superhero genre has been heralded as one of the forerunners of transmedia storytelling (Gotto 2014; Freeman 2015), comic books in fact have a very long history of fragmented participation within the narrative ecosystem (Stuller 2012). Much of the existing scholarship on comic book audiences, at least, posits that the majority of readers are male – estimated to be as high as 90 percent (Brown 1997; Tankel and Murphy cited in Scott 2011). Pustz (2000) indicates that female readers, by comparison, tend to buy 'alternative' titles from independent publishers rather than mainstream superhero comics. But what characterises this 'alternative' ethos across multiple media, at least with regards to Captain Marvel? What does it actually look like textually and how do audiences articulate it?

Importantly, there is the sense that the majority of the fans surveyed for this chapter do not follow the interrelated titles that typify the transmedia Marvel Universe. As the basis for igniting many fans' transmedia motivations, textually fans constructed meaning for Captain Marvel not based on any 'official' or 'core' comics, but rather on highly selective strands of consumption, thus tapping into ideas of sub-cultural communities versus popular culture within the larger narrative ecosystem. Despite the wide-scale success of their cinematic counterparts, comic books still remain a predominantly subcultural medium with a far more limited reach (Grisnati 2014). It figures that a good proportion of movie-going audiences may never flow between the two media, no matter how close the interactions are among the various elements of the ecosystem. Indeed, Stevens and Bell found that comic book fans considered those who only consume the film versions not to be 'authentic' fans (2012, 775), pointing to the way that fans partake in a hierarchical privileging of some media over others.

Tracing the direction of audience migration across different Captain Marvel media texts for the fans surveyed in this study highlights just how particular those fans can be. The *Captain Marvel* solo comic title – written by Kelly Sue DeConnick and launched in 2012 – was a key touchstone for fans, a title which itself remained a predominantly self-contained narrative apart from a crossover event in *Avengers: The Enemy Within* in 2013. Some fans expressed a keen interest in *Captain Marvel* remaining a self-contained title, with one claiming: 'I read all the first volume of her comics and then I got lost somewhere during a big crossover in space.' Other fans were even more emphatic on this point, with one noting that 'I read all of Carol Danvers, but not much else.' When asked which other Marvel characters and products they engaged with besides those of Captain Marvel, another fan declared bluntly: 'None at all.'

Such resistance to transmedia activity, at least in the customary sense based on storylines, is in spite of Marvel's clear attempts to integrate the character into transmedia narratives. During the same period as the *Avengers: The Enemy Within* era, for instance, Captain Marvel re-joined the core Avengers team in *The Avengers: Avengers World* and appeared in several issues following *Guardians of the Galaxy* #15. *The Avengers* is one of the core titles within the Marvel roster, and whilst many male participants listed it within the titles they read, only 8 per cent of female fans did the same. Instead, many of these female fans listed titles including *Hawkeye* (2012), *Young Avengers* (2013), *Spider-Woman* (2014) and *Ms Marvel* (2014). Crucially, all of these titles can be conceived as 'low-stake access' (Scott 2013, 6) in that they are for the most part not impacted by events in the core titles and have limited narrative crossovers. Not all of these titles actually feature Captain Marvel (besides a few cameo appearances), but they do all function in a similar way to her solo titles in that they are accessible to new audiences and shy away from complex, interconnected narrative arcs. In other words, part of the alternative ethos that characterises many Captain Marvel fans and their chosen media is based on self-contained narratives and a desire to operate outside of the vast world-building crossovers and long-form storytelling that has long defined the Marvel Universe. Based on the fans that I surveyed, only 7 per cent were said to be interested in following Captain Marvel in the core *Avengers* comic; 8 per cent had watched the *Avengers* TV cartoon; and just 7 per cent had seen Captain Marvel appear in the *X-Men* TV cartoon.

Being a fan of Captain Marvel (and Captain Marvel alone) was equally characterised by the purchasing of much Captain Marvel merchandise, with some fans limiting their paratextual activities to clothes and toys branded with the superheroine. 'I have a T-shirt, and I bought her action figure', one fan declared in response to the question of what other products they had bought. Indeed, on average one in four of the fans surveyed had previously bought items of Captain Marvel clothing, toys, or jewellery. Such fans wished to create an identity around their passion that spread as far as their own image, but not to media products or stories not seen to embody the precise alternative ethos of that image. Interestingly, nearly 60 per cent of fans stated that they were looking forward to the blockbuster solo movie based on the character (scheduled for release in 2019), with one fan declaring: 'I hope that as a result of the movie she becomes more popular in the mainstream.' And yet a desire to engage with alternative Marvel titles, existing – to paraphrase Dick Hebdige (1979, 355) – like a 'noisy' Marvel subculture alongside the 'sound' of the core Marvel titles, one that acts like 'a kind of temporary blockage in the system of representation', is nonetheless what best epitomises the transmedia behaviours and motivations of many of this particular Captain Marvel fan base.

So, if the transmedia behaviour of this faction of fandom is indeed best encapsulated by the notion of subculture – as a kind of marginalised community based on self-actualization that in turn informs their social and cultural identity – then in what stories does this alternative ethos manifest, and what does it look like? Throughout my survey, a number of titles were referenced time and time again as key emblems of the transmedia ethos I describe. The first was *A-Force* (2015), which features Marvel's first all-female team of Avengers. The comic began as part of an alternative universe that provided a structure through which Marvel diversified their storyworld into alternate factions. So-called second-tier titles including the likes of *A-Force*, *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur* (2015) and *Angela: Queen of Hel* (2015) all held similar values in the eyes of fans. *A-Force*, in particular, was seen to be opening up a dialogue about gender and diversity in comics, being sexually and ethnically diverse and driven by character with a strong focus on interpersonal relationships. The way in which female Captain Marvel fans, especially, navigate the Marvel storyworld does not lead to them to the big core titles, even when invited to do so through the inclusion of Captain Marvel.

A title that did, however, readily encourage fans to follow the character beyond her solo comic was *The Ultimates*, a thirteen-issue series published between 2012 and 2014. Written by Mark Millar and featuring many of the male Avengers characters, *The Ultimates* is not especially feminist, but it does embody a sense of alternativism important to many of the Captain Marvel fans spoken to. In a 2004 interview, Millar outlined the difference between *The Ultimates* and *The Avengers*: ‘The idea behind *The Avengers* is that the Marvel Universe’s biggest players all get together and fight all the biggest super-villains they can’t defeat individually, whereas *Ultimates* is an exploration of what happens when a bunch of ordinary people are turned into super-soldiers and being groomed to fight the real-life war on terror.’ Following the main *Captain Marvel* title, *The Ultimates* was by far the most popular extension title for the Captain Marvel fans surveyed, with many fans citing its ‘wonderful team’, ‘progressive expansion of the character’ and ‘thoughtful’ depictions as key reasons. In other words, it is not simply a diverse, character-driven mantra that guides the Captain Marvel fan base across multiple titles and media. In addition to this, it is an alternative story milieu, crafted of realism and topicality in ways that stands apart from the fantasy and spectacle of the core Marvel storyworld, which ignites strong migratory audience activity. Beyond tying to aforementioned and broader distinctions between mainstream comics culture and alternative culture, the idea that audiences may opt to follow philosophies over plots within a given narrative ecosystem raises important questions concerning the continued relation between all elements within an ecosystem, and indeed their collective importance. Addressing this question, other emerging research in the field indicates that understanding the critical relationship between multiple media elements within an ecosystem is indeed not always based on ideas of story, but is more conceptual. Somewhat ironically, much of said research has been focusing not on narrative at all, but rather on non-fiction transmediality.

Non-Fiction

Non-fiction, in fact, is useful for almost forcing researchers to re-conceptualise what is meant by transmediality, and to assess what it means for narrative ecosystems to operate across multiple media platforms in ways that go beyond basic notions of storytelling and related concepts of seriality. While scholarship dwells on the commercial, global industry formations of transmediality, there has been little attempt to track or to understand a more socio-political idea of transmediality. In one sense, examining transmediality from a more social perspective means thinking about it as a non-fictional engagement strategy that has ramifications in terms of people, leisure, activism, politics, and society itself. It is possible to trace how social media has informed the way that long-standing charity campaigns are now promoted as transmedia campaigns, with non-fictional forms of narrative engaging people across multiple platforms.

Let’s consider Comic Relief and its popular Red Nose Day as an indicative case study for thinking about narrative ecosystems through the lens of non-fictional media. In brief, the aim of Red Nose Day is to use comedy to raise money and change lives, with a mission statement that seeks ‘to drive positive change through the power of entertainment.’ But its mantra lies in notions of clean-living, of fun, of joining in, of a common cause, of not taking oneself too seriously, and yet remembering that not taking oneself too seriously is in the name of something quite serious – something that is social, and far bigger than the individual. As a reporter for the *Birmingham Post* once characterised, also, ‘Red nose people have big hearts and want poverty and starvation to end right now. The political problems which are often the root cause of such suffering interest them less than the thought of doing something good’ (*Birmingham Post* 1999, 33). Red Nose Day promotes the message that when you smile, the

world smiles with you. How, though, do the themes and money-donating dynamics of Red Nose Day manifest transmedially and evolve alongside the rise of social media platforms?

Most simply, the narrative ecosystem of Red Nose Day positions the main television event broadcast on BBC One as the centre-piece that all other extra pieces of media point towards, with said extra pieces working primarily to distribute the meanings and messages of the campaign across media. Much more specifically, however, the narrative ecosystem of Red Nose Day works to connect particular platforms with particular themes that all work together to create what Elizabeth Evans has described as an overarching transmedia estate (i.e. ‘a single, coherent online space guided by a channel or broadcaster’s brand identity’ (2015)).

And in the case of Red Nose Day, the campaign’s broadcaster – the BBC – is defined by a brand identity based on principles of entertainment and information/education, and that identity informs how Red Nose Day expands across platforms as a narrative ecosystem. Allow me to explain. By and large, the Facebook page for the Red Nose Day campaign is populated with content that is generally either entertaining *or* educational in its objectives, but rarely both. Characteristically, it is the former that is prioritised in the build-up to Red Nose Day. Short comedic videos, typically fronted by celebrities, including teaser clips of many of the sketches to be seen in full during the telethon, function much like commercial promos in the same way as media paratexts. But in the case of non-fictional transmediality such as Red Nose Day, it is again not so much a narrative as it is an *ethos* that is being advanced and developed across platforms, with the meanings of Red Nose Day (fun, clean-living, joining in, not taking oneself too seriously, etc.) not located solely within the broadcasted television event but also extended across multiple promotional forms.

Following the end of Red Nose Day and the television broadcast, for example, it is the role of social media to uphold the more educational aspects of Red Nose Day. Specifically, it is Facebook that works to strengthen the key purpose behind Comic Relief, and does so by reinforcing the sustained poverty in countries like Kenya and Ethiopia, making use of its status as a perpetual platform – one that more easily pervades audiences’ lives every minute of every day – to keep the cause in the public eye long after the telethon has ended (Freeman 2016b). These appeal films are extracted from the television broadcast, but are stripped of the comedy trappings that would bookend them on television and re-published online with a phone number to donate clearly emphasised. As such, the ‘storytelling’ of Red Nose Day across television and Facebook thus lies in the juxtaposition between entertainment and education, between comedy and poverty: Audiences are engaged every day with snippets of the former online, watch a mixture of both during the telethon, and then continue to be persuaded online with powerful messages of the latter, each characteristically fronted by a famous British celebrity in a way that continues to hint at a sense of entertainment via the entertainments for the which they are known. Importantly, then, the narrative ecosystem of Red Nose Day works to always retain its ethos of clean-living, of fun, and of a common cause, even when it does not. That is to say that the discourse often emphasised in the documentaries about poverty in third-world countries is one of loss, focusing primarily on that which is missing from peoples’ lives. We hear of absent parents, for example, of the struggle to find clean water, of the lack of laughter, or of the constant pressure to survive. In other words, it is the presence versus the absence of clean-living and fun that juxtaposes between the scenes of comedy and poverty in the overall Red Nose Day media experience.

Meanwhile, the role of the Red Nose Day Twitter page is partly to document the aftermath of the donations during the television broadcast. Twitter is used to post stories of the local

communities that have benefitted from Red Nose Day, with web links to interviews and newspaper articles that showcase the good that is now being accomplished. In this sense, at least, one might detect a clear linearity to the ecosystem of Red Nose Day across platforms: Whereas Facebook focuses on the ‘before’ (the lead-up to Red Nose Day itself and the sorts of fundraising under way), and live television broadcast represents the ‘present’ (the main act, as it were), then Twitter showcases the ‘future’ of the story (telling the tales of what happened after the television event). In other words, understanding Red Nose Day – and to some extent various other forms of non-fiction transmediality in the UK – as a narrative ecosystem really means conceptualising a balance between the spread of thematically grouped information and the strategic organisation of that information across platforms [1].

Beyond this context of the contemporary UK mediascape, the increasingly complex convergence of very different styles, stories, formations, practices, industries, arts and cultures of transmediality points to the significance of adopting a narrative ecosystem approach – an approach that might take many different forms and which will be showcased further in the later chapters of this book. At this stage, however, suffice to say that in aiming to provide a theoretical contribution to contextual understandings of narrative ecosystems, this chapter has highlighted the importance of understanding the vastness of transmediality in terms of an expansive form of intertextuality. By which I really mean the modes by which multiple pieces of media content must feed into one another within the ecosystem and yet simultaneously embark on their own unique path. So let’s be clear: Transmedia storytelling is about taking a story and making it bigger by extending it across media. It is an expansive form of intertextuality that builds textual and paratextual connections between stories, brands and audiences while allowing those stories to escape their textual borders and exist in between them as well as across them, folding paratext into text. Whether it be via the lens of brand, audience specificity, or even non-fiction, understanding transmediality as vast narrative ecosystems means understanding media as the building of variation on sameness – underpinned principally by alignments across platforms, industries, cultures and audiences.

Notes

[1] Such a balance between themes and strategy across media is also what underpins current notions of transmedia journalism, too. Scholars such as Renira Rampazzo Gambarato, for example, are now embarking on cutting-edge research into the role of transmediality in/as forms of journalism and interactive documentary around the world. In Russian, Gambarato claims, transmediality is ‘at the intersection between documentary and journalism’ (2018), with projects such as *Grozny: Nine Cities* – a documentary-photography project – now being developed as ecosystems where diverse online forms of interactive documentary, audio-visual installations, photo exhibitions, soundtrack albums, books, websites and social media all inform one another. In the case of *Grozny: Nine Cities*, the project was developed from 2009 to 2014, and provides an in-depth approach to the complex stories behind oppressed Grozny via the differing eyes and styles of three authors and multiple media platforms. For Gambarato, ‘interactive documentaries, slow journalism and transmedia storytelling are tools that can contribute to changing the audience’s low level of participation paradigm in Russia, introducing contemporary forms of convergence cultures’ (2018).

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