

Teach students to communicate a brand story with transmedia storytelling

John Cronin

*Department of Marketing, Western Connecticut State University, Danbury,
Connecticut, USA*

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to introduce a new integrated marketing communication (IMC) strategy, not yet appearing in textbooks, into the classroom.

Design/methodology/approach – A thorough review of the limited sources so far available introduces the subject. This is followed by a report on the results of the author's own introduction of the topic into his course.

Findings – Students reacted very favorably to learning this new and challenging marketing communication strategy. They also reinforced their own understanding of other principles, e.g. content management, taught earlier in the course.

Practical implications – Adoption of transmedia storytelling will advance the teaching of IMC in the classroom.

Originality/value – This paper proposes a formal definition of marketing transmedia storytelling. No pedagogic paper has previously been published on this new IMC strategy.

Keywords Social media marketing, Integrated marketing communications, Corporate identity and branding, Marketing higher education

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Following a brief review of the concept of integrated marketing communication (IMC), which readers familiar with the concept may wish to skip over, this paper presents the concept of the brand story and the idea of storytelling as preparatory to a presentation of transmedia storytelling. Transmedia storytelling is shown to be an effective response to the changing media consumption habits of the modern consumer. A definition of marketing transmedia storytelling is proposed. The second half of the paper presents the author's experience using transmedia storytelling as a comprehensive project in his IMC course.

Integrated marketing communication

Marketing communication evolved from uncoordinated communication efforts in multiple media by various parts of an organization, such as advertising, sales promotion and public relations departments, to coordinated or IMCs. IMC has been defined in slightly different ways over the past two decades; one definition is "IMC is a strategic marketing process specifically designed to ensure that all messaging and communications strategies are unified across all channels and are centered around the customer" (*Journal of Integrated Marketing Communications*, 2016). In other words, a



key concept of IMC is that the audience will receive a consistent message from the organization regardless of where the audience comes in contact with it. As we will see below, the new concept of transmedia storytelling substantially alters that idea.

The advent of the internet and especially social media has seen the rising importance of content and the curation of that content, i.e. content marketing. The proliferation of social media sites has fractionated the audience for a company's communications. Firms must now put their story on many more media than in the "old days", increasing the demands on marketing departments and turning those departments, at least partially, into publishing organizations. Content marketing is defined by the [Content Marketing Institute \(2014\)](#) as:

[...] a marketing technique of creating and distributing relevant and valuable content to attract, acquire, and engage a clearly defined and understood target audience – with the objective of driving profitable customer action.

Content marketing's goal is to gain and retain customers by curating content that is relevant and useful to the audience which will, ultimately, give the organization their loyalty.

To conduct content marketing with limited budgets, organizations often multipurpose content. For example, a blog post may also appear in a firm's email newsletter as well as being a Facebook post, one or more tweets, etc. Multipurposing can make social media publishing even more efficient by electronically linking a company's various internet sites. For example, a tweet can appear on the firm's Facebook page without human effort.

The multipurposing strategy of content marketing means the audience will see the same message in these various social media, which is consistent with the IMC concept. But the proliferation of social media and platforms to view them on has changed the way audiences consume media. The reason traditional marketing approaches do not work in social media is that the social Web has created a new consumer psychology in which they are co-participants and collaborators ([Buckner and Rutledge, 2011](#)). It is no longer enough to disseminate one message over multiple media. Many consumers browse multiple social sites expecting to find fresh, unique content about the firm or its brands. Consumers who visit a firm's Facebook page for the first time may become interested and perhaps go to that organization's blog for more information. But if they read on the blog only, the same information that was posted on Facebook, it is unlikely many of them will return a third time. Therefore, there is a need for a continual stream of fresh, new information from the company, tailored to each social site and distributed systematically across those media.

The brand story

But what is the content of the messages being disseminated by marketers-turned-publishers on the social Web? It is certainly not a hard sell, "buy this brand". Marketers have learned that selling on social media sites must be done delicately, if at all. Instead, the message that should be spread is the "brand story". A brand's story is not a new concept; yet, it has not been fully understood by many marketers. "Agencies and brands need to move away from thinking about branded content and embrace true storytelling" ([Hamm, 2013](#)). Every brand has a story and, as [All \(2013\)](#) says, "Great stories are more valuable to a brand than ever before, and storytelling is an organization's greatest secret weapon in its quest to differentiate itself from its competition". Readers who wish more information about the

brand story concept will find ample information elsewhere (Barlow and Maul, 2000; Fog *et al.*, 2010; McKee and Fryer, 2003).

Fleming (2011) notes:

[...] the art of storytelling in recent days has made a resurgence in business and marketing. People are realizing the power that narrative has in engaging and informing people about a product or a brand.

There is theoretical support for the positive effects of storytelling. Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory explains the reader's contact with text as a process, including how a dialogue between reader and text takes place. It describes a major stimulus to reader involvement as textual gaps which encourage the reader to mentally fill in those gaps (Iser, 1978).

Stories arouse emotions, and emotions are vital to learning (McMahon, 2013). There is a large body of research in neuroscience, psychology and related fields into the effects of emotion on learning, including seminal works by Damasio (1994) and Goleman (2005).

The beginning of transmedia storytelling

The term "transmedia storytelling" was introduced in the MIT Technology Review by Jenkins (2003, p. 3), applying the concept to the entertainment industry:

[...] 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 [...] each franchise entry needs to be self-contained enough to enable autonomous consumption. That is you don't need to have seen the film to enjoy the game, and vice-versa [...] any given product is a point of entry into the franchise as a whole.

Later, at the University of Southern California, Jenkins refined his thinking into a definition of transmedia storytelling. He said transmedia storytelling represents a process whereby integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story (Jenkins, 2011).

Hollywood has been giving us stories for a hundred or more years, so it is not surprising that the entertainment industry was the first to use transmedia storytelling (Fiorelli, 2013). Two examples from that industry should make the transmedia storytelling concept clear before we introduce a discussion of its application to wider fields of marketing.

The Matrix is a prime example of transmedia storytelling, according to Jenkins (2006). The Matrix was a successful entertainment project that evolved over feature movies, animated shorts, comic books and video games. After three feature films, the characters and settings of the films then were developed in other media set in the same universe, including animation, comics, a number of books, a video game and a collection of nine animated shorts.

A more recent example of transmedia storytelling in the entertainment industry is The White Queen, a miniseries on a cable network. The director of digital marketing at that network explained that her objective is to tell mini-stories that reflect and amplify the show and to present the content in a way that people can engage:

We don't just push content at people. We're trying to add something of value [...] We invite people to participate by submitting their own creative. And we also mix the types of content we

offer – video, lists, longer-form content, behind-the-scenes looks at the show. That variety helps people engage on deeper levels over time. Ultimately we're looking to do more than engage just for the sake of it – we want our presence to help people enjoy the show more" (Facebook News, 2013).

Marketing's adoption of transmedia storytelling

Gradually, transmedia storytelling is being adopted by the marketing profession. "The exciting field of transmedia storytelling is an approach being adopted by more and more marketing and ad agencies around the globe" according to Latouf (2013a). Examples of transmedia storytelling include work done by the retailer REI (Fiorelli, 2013), the Levi's Go Forth campaign (www.levistrauss.com/news/press-releases/levi-s-brand-debuts-2012-go-forth-global-marketing-campaign), Stella Artois' Sable and Shuck alternate reality game (www.argn.com/tag/stella_artois/), and the nonprofit agency Save the Children's "Every Beat Matters" campaign www.multivu.com/mnr/58026-ad-council-save-the-children-every-beat-matters-onerepublic-feel-again).

Evidence of the increasing adoption of transmedia storytelling includes the appearance of advertising and marketing agencies that offer transmedia storytelling or brand story support, e.g. No Mimes Media (www.nomimes.com), Storytellings Consulting (www.storytellings.com) and Lehmann and Lehmann Communications (www.lehmannandlehmann.com). A "transmedia branding program" has been established at the University of Southern California. A possibly extreme view of the future of transmedia storytelling is by Latouf (2013b):

[...] within 10 years ad agencies will become redundant. So will marketing companies. The company of the future is a storytelling company. A company that is tech-savvy and sensitive to multi-platform storytelling.

Scolari (2008) of the Spanish University of Vic, has studied the transformation that brands have undergone since the rise of the internet. He concluded that digital media interaction – the interactive experience that the internet user experiences – now occupies a central position in the brand building process. Scolari (2009) has also written a theoretical analysis of transmedia storytelling from a semiotics perspective.

Transmedia storytelling in business applications is too new to have produced much academic research, although Scolari (2009) has proposed directions for research into this topic. He recommends analysis of more transmedia storytelling experiences to establish properties, limits and possibilities, and to learn more about transmedia narrative structures. He cites Perryman (2008) and Long (2007) as good examples of this research.

When defining transmedia storytelling, Jenkins was concerned about the entertainment business, but this definition can be expanded to marketing in general. It is proposed here that *marketing transmedia storytelling is a process whereby elements of a brand story get dispersed systematically across multiple media for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated consumer experience with the brand, with each medium making its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story.*

Transmedia storytelling can be considered a form of what is called distributed narrative by Walker (2004). She described distributed narratives as ones that have no clear boundaries and violate the dramatic principle of unity. Instead, the narratives are distributed over time, i.e. the audience experiences the story in chunks over a period. The story is also distributed in space, which means there is no single medium in which the

audience can experience the whole story. The narratives have distribution of authorship: no single author or group of authors has complete control over the evolving of the story (although the marketer has initial control). While distribution over time is nothing new – consider television miniseries and soap operas – the other two distributions are more radical.

Transmedia storytelling creates incompleteness, but rather than letting the reader mentally project completeness as when reading a novel, it invites the audience to other media to fill in the blanks. Hamm (2013) explains, “Stories rely on the intended audience to develop their own imagery and detail to complete and, most importantly, to co-create, whereas content does not”. The organization’s brand story is shared with the audience in a nonlinear way. The audience participates in the storytelling by clicking on links, adding comments, sharing the story with their friends and in other ways.

Characteristics of a successful transmedia story

The Latitude Group, a UK organization, surveyed “leaders in the emerging transmedia space” and asked them “how would you like to experience stories in the future?” From this survey, they distilled four principles for good transmedia storytelling (Garibian, 2012). The author of this paper has added two more principles based on a review of the literature (Table I).

Regarding one of these principles, continuity of characters, Fiorelli (2013) gives the example that the audience will expect Indiana Jones to act the same way in a videogame as in the movies. A marketing example would be that the audience would expect the Pillsbury Dough Boy to react the same way in all media when poked. Regarding another of the principles, Scolari (2009, p. 587) offered an example of the self-containment principle: “you don’t need to have seen the film to enjoy the video game, and vice versa”. An equivalent marketing example would be that you should be able to understand the tweets without having been to the blog site.

Advantages of transmedia storytelling

From the literature reviewed in this paper, a list of the advantages of transmedia storytelling includes those shown in Table II.

Transmedia storytelling takes advantage of rapidly changing consumer behavior on the internet. Consumers now have a large number of potential contact points with the marketer.

Principle	Description
Immersion	Delving deeper into the story via supplementary context and sensory experiences
Interactivity	Allowing consumers to become part of the narrative, and possibly influencing the outcome
Integration	Having a seamless connection among all platforms
Impact	Inspiring consumers to take action of some kind
Continuity of characters	Characters acting consistently in all media they appear in
Self-contained levels	Casual readers obtaining satisfaction at one level without having to immerse themselves deeper into the story

Table I.
Transmedia
storytelling
principles

Source: Source for first four items, (Garibian, 2012); fifth item Fiorelli (2013); sixth item Scolari (2009)

Table II.
Advantages of
transmedia
storytelling

Advantage	Description
Focus	Transmedia storytelling focuses the organization on telling its brand story more than on simply issuing an unrelated stream of content
Stickiness	Transmedia stories can enable the organization to retain the attention of the target market more than with other marketing communication strategies
Market growth	Transmedia stories can grow the target market by capturing people who, until they came across the story, had no interest in the brand but now wish to find subsequent story elements
Brand advocates (because of the emotional emphasis of storytelling)	Some target audience members will become advocates of the brand, whereas they would not become so with other methods
Lower cost	A transmedia brand story might be conceptualized and placed into the media at less than the cost of creating new content continuously In addition, the organization's message can be strengthened and diffused more widely by audience-generated ("crowd sourced") adaptations of the story, at little or no cost

In a world where users are engaging with their content across multiple devices, it seems that a framework like transmedia storytelling might be the best solution to organizing that content into a cohesive story that appeals to this new generation of consumers (Thibeault, 2013).

As Fogel (2012) says:

We live in a transmedia world, meaning that we now seamlessly move from mobile phone to computer to television – often all at the same time! Transmedia storytelling takes advantage of this fluidity by spreading different parts of a story across multiple media and allowing the audience to become participants in integrating the pieces.

Limitations of transmedia storytelling

It is likely that not all members of the target market will participate in a transmedia story. Some may make little or no use of the internet; others may simply not be interested in the brand story, even though they are consumers of the product. There is no published research showing the demographics, psychographics or other characteristics of audiences that respond to transmedia storytelling.

Since some marketing organizations first heard about transmedia storytelling, the meaning of the term has occasionally been misused by those who, not fully understanding it, have equated it to multimedia communication, content marketing, IMC, multiplatform communication and probably other terms. Scolari (2009) characterized the situation as semantic chaos.

Teaching transmedia storytelling: the project

In the remainder of this paper, results of a semester-long project to develop the ability of undergraduate marketing majors to understand and use transmedia storytelling are presented. As far as this author can determine, this is the first paper to be published on this pedagogy.

There were several motivations for including instruction in transmedia storytelling in the course agenda. It was believed that it would clarify to students the important concepts involved: IMCs, the brand story and content management. It was hoped that it would also give the students new job opportunities and a competitive advantage over job applicants who have not heard about transmedia storytelling. They might even be first in line for the job of Transmedia Manager that Hofer (2013) anticipates appearing in the near future. Including the latest developments in marketing, even before they are incorporated into textbooks, might be helpful when the course is critiqued by internal or external assessors, e.g. accrediting agencies. It would definitely help students develop their creative and writing abilities, both of which are in need of greater attention in business school curricula. Finally, it was expected to be fun and interesting for the students to apply in a group term project.

The project could have been done individually or in small groups. Group work was chosen to permit the instructor to meet with students during the semester; meeting with individual students was impractical due to the size of the class (23 students).

Due to the complexities of transmedia storytelling, a rather extensive effort was undertaken to prepare the students for this experiential project, consisting of three (ungraded) activities:

- (1) a lecture;
- (2) exercise #1: putting a fairy tale into the form of a transmedia story; and
- (3) exercise #2: a hypothetical transmedia storytelling campaign for a branded consumer good.

At the end of these activities, students wrote a “reaction paper” worth a modest number of points toward the course grade. In a few pages, the students provided feedback on the activities, saying what they liked or had trouble with, and what they would change if they could. Relevant comments by the students are included in the rest of this narrative.

The lecture covered the concepts of IMC, content management, brand story and transmedia storytelling. The first two topics were treated in summary fashion because of previous knowledge of the class, and were presented only for the purpose of leading the students methodically into the concept of transmedia storytelling.

Students were then presented with a concrete example of the idea of transmedia storytelling through a classroom discussion using a fascinating adaptation of the story of the three little pigs created by Dr Pamela Rutledge of the Massachusetts School of Professional Psychology (Rutledge, n.d.). Using this story at the beginning of the class project has the advantage that all students will understand it, including those from other cultures, and also avoids the complicating challenge of trying to work with the concept of an organization’s brand story at the same time; brand story would be introduced in the following class session. The class was asked to read the story before coming to class, which some thought was an interesting request and others thought to be “stupid”. After a brief review of the story, the class worked with the instructor to plan a transmedia storytelling version of the story on the internet, beginning by listing the characters in the story: the four principal characters (three pigs and a wolf) plus the minor characters: the pigs’ mother and the vendors of straw, sticks and bricks. Students struggled a bit to list on the board the themes of the story: work before play, family unity or lack thereof and persistence (by the wolf).

Then the class was divided in half. One half designed the transmedia story and decided how to expand the characters and themes, with substantial guidance from the instructor based on Rutledge's article. The other half represented the target audience; they followed the discussion and asked questions to help the designers clarify the ideas. Here are the resulting story elements:

- A blog by the pigs' mother, initially discussing her emotional reaction to the little pigs' decision to live apart rather than together (the family unity theme). It would express her concern about lurking wolves in the neighborhood, with a link to the wolf's website. Later, it would show her emotions upon hearing the news of each wolf attack.
- The wolf's website shows how the wolf came to have his antisocial tendencies, and shows his persistent scheming to eat the little pigs, including surveillance photos of the houses. The website would be updated periodically as he attacks each pig's house, showing his initial satisfaction and frustration.
- Websites for each little pig, developing the frivolous behavior of the first two and the serious nature of the third. Each site would show designs of the houses they intend to, and later do, build. Comments can be added by visitors to the websites, expressing concerns over the ability of these designs to withstand heavy huffing and puffing.
- Links on the blogs and websites to maps of the area, showing the location of the pigs' homes and the wolf's lair. These, in turn, carry links to the other sites.
- Pigs' Twitter accounts, tweeting breaking news during each Wolf attack and a Twitter account for the Wolf, who sends tweets hinting at imminent attacks.

Next, the other half of the class was asked to mimic audience involvement and decide how they would comment on and possibly alter the story. Here is what they visualized (again with instructor's prompting):

- A backlash by wolf supporters, who form a discussion group or a wiki to offer suggestions to the wolf, and to suggest alternate endings to the story designers, e.g. the wolf goes to therapy and becomes a solid citizen.
- A comic book with the pigs as super heroes vanquishing wolves everywhere.
- A Pinterest site on which the audience posts pictures of better home designs and materials the pigs might use.
- A new videogame called "Angry Pigs". ("Gamification" is a common kind of transmedia storytelling strategy; see [Wikipedia, 2013](#)).
- The introduction of other characters from other fairy tales, such as the wolf from Little Red Riding Hood to assist the Wolf by scouting out the pigs' locations and learning when they are likely to be home, or a woodsman or hunter to complicate the Wolf's plans.

By now the students appeared to understand the difference between other forms of IMC and transmedia storytelling, including how in transmedia storytelling the story itself evolves over time and Web location, and how the audience can participate in the story to alter it. To reinforce that learning, the instructor then showed in class a very creative video by the Manchester Guardian, which won a Cannes Lion and has had over two million views on

YouTube, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=vDGrfhJH1P4. It imagines how the story of the three little pigs might be reported in print and online, generating a discussion in the social media, and ending with a surprising and provocative plot twist at the end (all in two minutes). Showing this video led to a fun class discussion making changes and additions to the transmedia storytelling plan the students had envisioned earlier.

Student feedback was extremely positive. One said, “I can’t think of anything I would change or improve. We had the opportunity to be creative, use back-stories, start from anywhere, etc”. Another commented, “What was very helpful for me was to watch the commercial you presented; “The Guardian, Three Little Pigs ‘Open Journalism’ Commercial”. I remember when I watched for the first time it was fascinating to (sic) how a well know story was transformed and used to promote something else; it was very ingenious the way they created a story of a story”.

The following class, the concept of a brand story was introduced by having the students work on a second exercise. They assumed they were the marketing department for a large manufacturer of bricks, sold nationwide to wholesalers, such as brickyards and building supply companies. Sales have been lackluster, so a new marketing strategy has been created. The company wanted to create the first “consumer branded” brick and advertise directly to consumers in a pull campaign. The message to be communicated in this campaign is “Our bricks create truly safe homes”. Furthermore, it has been decided to use the story of the three little pigs as the Big Idea for an campaign using transmedia storytelling, targeting any consumer thinking of building a home or having one built. Students were told to design the campaign considering these questions:

- Q1. Will you use more or different media than we have selected so far? (One obvious possibility was the brick manufacturer’s website).
- Q2. How will you attract your target audiences to your brand story? In other words, how do they discover the story? (A link on the manufacturer’s website and tweets by the company are possibilities).
- Q3. How will you motivate the audience to keep following the story over time and across media? (Employing a “cliffhanger” and/or a plot twist at the end of each element of the story is one idea).
- Q4. What emotion or emotions are you going to arouse in the audience? (There are many possibilities, e.g. sympathy for the pigs’ mother and fear of or sympathy for the wolf. A primary emotion, though, would be identification with the third pig, generating feelings of safety and security).
- Q5. How will you incorporate the brand into the story? (An obvious possibility is making the man who gives bricks to the third pig a salesman for the company).

Feedback on this exercise was also positive, although there were a few complaints about difficulty arranging group meetings and about free riders. Comments included “I never heard of Transmedia Storytelling before and I’m so thankful that you’ve shared it with us!” Another student said:

I had trouble with separating the story of “the three pigs” from the media portion of the assignment at the start of the project. After a while, we determined that the story should be written first, then the type of media should be established.

Another useful comment:

At first, the hardest thing to grasp in Transmedia Storytelling was how to make the story be a continuation in each of the media spots. For example: let's say a story was posted on Facebook, and then a continuation of that story gets posted on Twitter. I found it difficult to comprehend that if someone were to visit Twitter first, how would they not feel that they came in the middle of a story? If I saw some examples, I'm sure I would have understood it faster.

After these introductory activities, students were assigned the graded semester project created by the instructor. The possibility of inviting one or another corporation to provide and participate in the transmedia storytelling project was rejected because the company itself would likely have little or no experience with, or understanding of, transmedia storytelling due to its newness.

Unlike the earlier exercises, definite criteria were established for the project, the first two based on [Golick \(2010a\)](#):

- The brand story must be presented in at least three media. There can be and perhaps should be more, but three is the minimum.
- The expression of the brand story in each medium must be unique, not merely the same content repurposed from a different media.
- There must be ways for the audience to find initial entry points to the story and to participate in each element as it is introduced. Do not rely on viral transmission or word of mouth. [Jenkins \(2011\)](#) de-emphasized continuity among the elements, though, believing that some overlapping or gaps, as in presenting the same event through different characters' eyes, encourages audience participation).
- Each new element added as the story progresses should provide new information which forces the audience to reconsider what is happening, and raises new questions.
- The campaign must make use of emotion.
- It must involve the readers, i.e. be interactive, which is easily accomplished in social media through likes, comments, etc.
- It must permit audience members to enter the story through any of the media used. In other words, some audience members may encounter the story by coming across a tweet, or reading a blog, etc., and, regardless, still feel like they are entering the story at a beginning.
- Each story element must have a "hook" or "cliffhanger", to drive the audience to seek more. Details which hint at more yet to be revealed can motivate the audience to seek out the next element and in some instances generate their own story element to resolve the unknown.
- The way the success of the effort will be measured has to be considered. Analytics should show the organization which elements of the brand story and which media produce audience involvement, versus which result in "closing the book".

If the instructor wants the students to actually create the media, e.g. a website, teams should be formed so that each team has at least one member able to do that work. Students were not required to create the actual media, e.g. the blogs, just the plan.

The first step in the project was the teams picked a product or service brand. They found that not all brands are equally amenable to storytelling. To stretch creativity and discourage plagiarizing from existing transmedia storytelling examples that can be found on the Web, the instructor should exclude entertainment products such as movies, TV shows and books. Alternatively, the instructor could provide the brands, which was the case here. These could be invented or real. Real brands that have strong stories to tell make good choices, e.g. Newman’s Own and Jack Daniels.

Before structuring the transmedia scheme, the teams were required to submit a simple narrative of the story. To do that, they needed to discover the brand’s story. “Reigniting a brand begins with retracing the history and original mission of the organization and rediscovering the founders grand vision”, LA2M (2013). Then, the teams structured the transmedia story, illustrating it by creating a matrix showing a timeline across one axis and the media used down the other. Figure 1 shows a matrix developed by one student team. See also an example of a real-world matrix in Scolari (2009, p. 596).

A supplementary narrative accompanied the matrix. This narrative described the entry points and pathways the team thought various audience members might take through the story elements. A student mused, “One of the hardest challenges in transmedia storytelling is making all of the pieces fit together while they also stand alone. These two things seem to contradict themselves”.

The structure of the transmedia story should recognize that there are fundamentally two groups of consumers of the story based on their consumption patterns: those who encounter the brand story in only one medium, some of whom may follow the development of the story in that one medium only while others do not follow it at all, and those who moves across media, following the links or other clues, looking for additional story content. The first group is relatively easy to manage – just present the story in that medium – but coordinating the experiences of the



Figure 1.
A student transmedia story matrix of time vs media used

second group as it moves from one medium to another is challenging. Nevertheless, as one student wrote, “Transmedia storytelling is something that the consumer will find fun, if done right, sort of like a treasure hunt where you get different bits of information from each piece”.

If the class has had enough experience or instruction in the use of media metrics (which was not the case in this course), they can be asked to include an analytical plan. Instructors can ask the following questions at the outset of the project:

- Q1. How will you know how many people constituted the audience?
- Q2. How many of them followed parts of the story versus how many followed the story to its end?
- Q3. Which elements of the story encouraged followers to link to the next part, and which elements “lost” the audience?

Even for students familiar with using analytics to evaluate social media, trying to create an integrated quantitative picture of audience involvement across media will prove challenging.

During the semester, the instructor met as necessary with each student group, pushing them through the mental roadblocks that occasionally arose. Presenting [Jenkins' \(2011\)](#) taxonomy in class part way through the project also was helpful. It says that most transmedia content serves one or more of the following functions:

- It offers a backstory, that is, tells the story of what happened in the story World and/or to characters before the brand story began. Using the three little pigs as an example, a backstory might show the audience how the pig family came to live in a small village harried by wolves, or how the Wolf was mistreated as a child.
- It expands the World, by offering subplots or additional characters, e.g. a psychiatrist treating the Wolf for his antisocial tendencies.
- It offers us other characters' perspectives on the action, i.e. seeing the same event from the point of view of multiple characters who may have conflicting perspectives on what is happening. What were the thoughts of the seller of straw when he learns the first pig wants to build a house of straw?
- It deepens audience engagement. This may be accomplished with the emotional content of the story. In the Manchester Guardian advert, the audience probably engaged more with the Wolf when it was disclosed he had asthma and may have been incapable of blowing down a house.

The second item in the above list, creating the World, deserves some elaboration here. Jenkins says that transmedia stories are not about particular characters, but rather about fictional worlds that can sustain a complex story. Creating a World enables “multiple subjectivity”, in which the events are seen from the viewpoints of different characters, each of whom introduces new information or insights. The world of the three little pigs is a pleasant enough rural area initially inhabited by a few characters and menaced by the Wolf, but capable of evolving as the story progresses.

Student reactions to transmedia storytelling

At the end of the project, students were required to write a paper on their reactions to the project. The project was initially well received by most students. A typical comment was "Overall I really enjoyed this project". One student even said:

My immediate reaction upon the introduction of the project was actually one of excitement. This is one of the few assignments throughout my college career where I felt any sort of eagerness to begin. I was thrilled at the opportunity to actually step inside the shoes of an advertiser and create my very own story.

Later on, though, as this same student observed:

I learned very quickly why it is so difficult to develop a truly effective campaign. Even sooner, I realized how tedious and mentally strenuous it can be to come up with compelling story. It takes a lot of time and collaboration to develop something that makes sense throughout its entirety as well as something that keeps the audiences' attention. If that wasn't difficult enough you need something that unmistakably conveys the brand story throughout your campaign across multiple platforms.

As the above quote shows, some students were really impressed by the idea of storytelling. One said, "This transmedia assignment was harder than I had expected. You need to use every inch of creativity that you have. This assignment really opened my eyes".

Students generally found the concept of transmedia storytelling easy to comprehend, but encountered some difficulty implementing the concept, as one student explained:

It's not hard to comprehend or understand transmedia storytelling. What is difficult about it is implementing the theory to a real situation. The theory is simple enough; tell a story over many platforms. But actually coming up with a strategy that works to implement it was very difficult. The way we decided to tackle the difficulties of creating the transmedia storytelling was to come up with a story first and then figure out where to put the pieces. Once all the pieces were in place [...] it came together really nicely.

A few students did have difficulty with the concept, though. One student exemplified the challenge he faced:

The idea of transmedia storytelling is a bit confusing in some aspects. It is hard to know how long to make a story so not to lose the attention of the viewers. Also it is hard to plan the transition to keep continuing the story and not get things mixed up or confuse the viewers. I think it is a little confusing how it is not the type of advertising that is saying Buy This.

A student observed that:

[...] as the days got closer to the due date the harder the assignment became. In order to make a story flow together, along with making sure the reader can attain the concept of the story at any point takes a lot of creativity. You think you know how to advertise or tell a story on social media? Not until you complete this assignment.

Another student pointed out the danger of getting lost in the details:

This experience was a challenge in the beginning. The challenges arose for a number of reasons: we were new to this experience and we were too focused on every little part of our story.

That concern was echoed by another student:

A confusing aspect of transmedia storytelling is knowing when you start to use fragments that just add confusion to the story. Whether (sic) it is a cliffhanger or deciding to add a character to the story, it is difficult because for the next fragment the story needs to make sense.

Another student voiced a similar comment:

The hardest parts were creating either the back story or continuing on with the story and creating a good hook for the readers to continue to follow along with the story. Between the two I would say the hook is the hardest to understand [...] each source needs a hook and a cliffhanger. This is definitely the most difficult part to Transmedia Storytelling.

Working in groups definitely helped, as one student noted: "I have some creativity but not the vision. It's a good thing that we were able to work in a group to accomplish the project".

A student expressed her reaction nicely:

This project was great. We really learned a lot from it and we got to be creative. That was probably my favorite part. A lot of my marketing classes in the past didn't allow you to be creative. It was about facts with a right or wrong answer. Marketing, to me, is just as much about being creative as it is about knowing all of the factual things and this was the first class where I truly was able to be creative. It was a great experience.

Conclusion

Including transmedia storytelling in an advertising or IMC course can be a fun and challenging way for students to learn about modern marketing communication while also keeping the curriculum up to date. Although transmedia storytelling campaigns have begun appearing, many marketing organizations may not make use of them until they have on their staff professionals who can meet the challenges of designing and implementing a transmedia storytelling campaign. Students who learn about transmedia storytelling in their coursework can provide the needed talent and help advance the practice of marketing communication. Hollywood has decided that a Transmedia Producer may be included in a movie's credits (Golick, 2010b), so perhaps it would not be long before Transmedia Producer is a common function in marketing agencies and businesses.

An executive at The Economist predicted:

At the intersection of mobile, social, and video, 2014 will be the year when brand building finally goes properly digital. At the heart of this change will be the emergence out of the shadows of "transmedia storytelling" with the most forward-thinking brands fully embracing the opportunity to engage people (CMO, 2013).

As Hamm (2013) said:

I don't believe this subtle yet vital shift is one that the majority of people in our business clearly understand. How we embrace this difference between content and stories and then bring true storytellers into our world will be the key to the future success of our industry. Content is dead. Long live storytelling.

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About the author

John Cronin is a full Professor in the Connecticut State University system where he teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in marketing and marketing communication. He holds a PhD from the University of Connecticut in addition to degrees from Indiana University and Northeastern University. John Cronin can be contacted at: croninj@wcsu.edu

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