

# CONVERGENCE AND TRANSMEDIA:

## semantic galaxies and emerging narratives in journalism

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Brasileira de  
Pesquisadores em  
Jornalismo

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**ABSTRACT** - This paper discusses the possibilities of the application in Journalism of the Transmedia Storytelling concept, proposed by Henry Jenkins (2003) for the fictional sphere. This paper first explores the definitions of Transmedia Storytelling and the conceptual differences between convergence and transmedia. It also proposes an approach to the transmedia concept in the journalistic universe, based on the perspective of knowledge produced in the transmedia dimension and on the formats' informational specificities. The study concludes with an initial exploration of examples about emerging narratives in transmedia journalism. The examples addressed are Immersive Journalism and Newsgames, suggesting that experimentation is an outstanding aspect of transmedia storytelling.

**Keywords:** Network. Journalism. Transmedia Storytelling. Media Convergence.

### CONVERGÊNCIA E TRANSMÍDIA

#### galáxias semânticas e narrativas emergentes em jornalismo

**RESUMO** - Este artigo procura discutir as possibilidades de aplicação no Jornalismo do conceito de narrativa transmidiática, proposto por Henry Jenkins (2003) no âmbito das narrativas ficcionais. Aborda inicialmente as definições de *Transmedia Storytelling*, investiga as diferenças conceituais entre convergência e transmídia e propõe uma abordagem própria do conceito de transmídia no universo jornalístico, fundada na perspectiva do conhecimento produzido em dimensão transmidiática e nas especificidades informacionais dos formatos. Conclui com uma exploração inicial de exemplos de narrativas emergentes no contexto do jornalismo transmidiático, como o Jornalismo de Imersão e os *newsgames*, sugerindo que o experimentalismo seja um aspecto marcante da narrativa transmídia.

**Palavras-chave:** Rede. Jornalismo. Narrativa transmidiática. Convergência.

## INTRODUCTION

On July 12, 2011, *The Economist* opened an online debate on the subject of *the news industry*, starting with the following motion: “*this house believes that the Internet is making journalism better, not worse*”. After ten days of discussions between the proposer of the motion, Jay Rosen, and his opponent, Nicholas Carr, the arguments of Rosen, representing a positive view of the effects of digital technologies and the Internet on the production and distribution of news, won. Although the result is interesting, we would like to highlight here the process and methodology used by the magazine to promote the event.

The debates promoted by *The Economist*<sup>2</sup> are modeled after the *Oxford Union*, the most famous debating society in the world, located in Oxford University, an institution with 186 years of history. The methodology has been practiced for decades by statesmen, intellectuals and thinkers in various knowledge fields. It revolves around an assertion that is supported on one side (the “proposer”) and assailed on another (the “opponent”) in a contest hosted and overseen by a moderator. Each side has three chances for persuasion: opening, rebuttal and closing.

*The Economist* transferred the methodology to the virtual universe, and since 2007 has conducted more than 80 debates on various subjects. In the online format, readers worldwide are invited to opine, that is, there is no territorial location for the event. Anyone can participate 24 hours per day and the arguments of all parties are full of hyperlinks to other contexts of arguments. The debates are published on social networks and even after their closure, they remain online for future references, without printing or distribution costs for the promoter.

We have used this example to introduce this article on the implementation of a transmedia concept in journalism, in order to exemplify some of the possibilities of communication expanded by the digital technologies. The proposed analogy is this: just as the initial Oxford format serves as a reference for the proposed virtual debate, but is transformed by network digital technologies, mediatically consolidated formats should serve as a reference for transmedia narratives, but adapted to the fluid and heterogeneous context of the network interstices.

Could this be what happens with the so-called transmediatic journalism? What would be the novelty in this process of production and distribution of news on multiple platforms? How could Jenkins’ (2008) concept be applied in the news industry, considering that it was

conceived based on the fictional universe? In which ways does it differ from the so talked-about media convergence?

### **Definitions of Transmedia Storytelling**

Henry Jenkins first used the term transmedia in an article written for the *Technology Review* magazine in 2003<sup>3</sup>. Three years later he perfected the concept in his book *Convergence Culture*, published in Brazil in 2008. Specifically interested in the movie *Matrix*, the author said that the experience of the Wachowski brothers was expanded beyond the big screen, becoming a Transmedia Storytelling.

A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best — so that a story might be introduced in a film, be expanded by television, novels, and comic books; its world might be explored in games or experienced as an amusement park attraction. Each franchise entry needs to be autonomous so it would not be necessary to see the film in order to enjoy the game, and vice versa. Each specific product is an access point to the franchise as a whole (JENKINS, 2008, p. 135).

Based on the concept proposed by Jenkins, Scolari (2009) defines Transmedia Storytelling<sup>4</sup> as a framework that expands both in terms of language (verbal, iconic, textual, etc.) and media (television, radio, mobile phone, Internet, games, comic books, etc.). An important feature of this type of narrative, according to this author, is that it is not repeated or simply be adapted from one media to another. The stories are complementary to each support and must make sense separately, as proposed by Jenkins. The author points out that the term still generates a lot of confusion.

Concepts such as “cross media” (Bechmann Petersen, 2006), “multiple platforms” (Jeffery-Poulter, 2003), “hybrid media” (Boumans, 2004), “intertextual commodity” (Marshall, 2004), “transmedia worlds” (Klastrup & Tosca, 2004), “transmedia interactions” (Bardzell, Wu, & Bardzell Quagliara, 2007), “multimodality” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001), or “intermedia” (Higgins, 1966) can be found orbiting in the same semantic galaxy (SCOLARI, 2009, p. 588).

For Bechmann Petersen (2006, p. 95), these phenomena relate to the same experience, translated into “a sense of production and interpretive practice based on narratives expressed by a coordinated combination of languages and media or platforms”.

Pernisa Junior (2010) extends this connection to the concept of multimedia proposed by Pierre Levy in the early 1990s. For him, both Levy and Jenkins “outline strategies that associate various media, in order to build a big story, what Jenkins calls the universe” (PERNISA

JR, 2010, p. 144).

### **Convergence and Transmedia**

In the field of journalism, there are few approaches conceptualized as Transmedia Storytelling<sup>5</sup>. However, there are at least a dozen books about Convergent Journalism, published mainly in the United States. What differentiates these two concepts? Would we again be referring to the same phenomenon with different semantics?

According to Fidler (1997), it was Nicholas Negroponte who first drew attention to the phenomenon of convergence in the lectures he made across the United States in 1979, raising funds to build a headquarters for the Media Labs at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Fidler says that people were generally amazed by the “revelation” of Negroponte that all communication technologies were going through a metamorphosis which could only be properly understood when treated as a single topic.

Since Negroponte built his theory on convergence, the term has been used in different circumstances leading to confusion. In the 1990s, for example, the term was used to refer to the combination of language resources from various media into a single media environment, which was then called hypermedia. At that time, there was a conceptual relationship between multimedia and convergence. Currently, the term refers to transmedia and is used to describe the flow of content dispersed among digital media connections. “Convergence represents a cultural transformation to the extent that consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content” (JENKINS, 2008, p. 28). He highlights the role of participatory culture in this scenario.

Quinn (2005, p.3) says that just as beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so the definition of convergence depends on the perspective of each individual. The author draws attention to an important feature of convergence: the fact that it varies from country to country, from culture to culture and from company to company. “The type of convergence that is developed in any company is a product of the culture of this company.”

Pernisa Junior (2010) presents, in our view, a narrow perspective of convergence, comparing it to the unimedia concept proposed by Pierre Levy. For him, convergence should not be understood directly as a transmedia experience, but as the junction of languages in a medium like the Internet. Yet Transmedia Storytelling would go beyond that, dealing with

a narrative model in which several platforms are used at the same time to tell a story. However, the platforms are used “intelligently”, synchronized, without falling into content redundancy and with a high level of participation (DORIA, apud PERNISA JR, 2010, p 3).

In his attempt to refine the concept of convergence, Jenkins (2001) argues emphatically that there will never be what the industry propagates as a single unit transmitting the entire contents of news and entertainment.

Media convergence is an ongoing process, occurring at various intersections of media technologies, industries, content and audiences; it is not a final state. There will never be one black box controlling all the media. Rather, thanks to the proliferation of channels and the increasingly ubiquitous nature of computing and communications, we are entering an era in which media will be everywhere, and we will use all the types of media relating them one to another. We will develop new skills for managing information, new structures for transmitting information by means of these channels, and new creative genres that exploit the potentials of those emerging structures (JENKINS, 2008, p.93).

Ford (2006) is more incisive in stating that convergence goes beyond the concept of transmedia.

I have to disagree with the view [of advertising executive Aayush Iyer, 2006] that the idea of transmedia is an advertising gimmick or is low in content. And I also would never make the claim that convergence is a term that is losing its usefulness, especially since our research at C3 is completely based on this concept. But media convergence implies a much wider view than the process of transmedia, which simply means telling a story through multiple media platforms (FORD in IYER, 2006).

However, this author believes that the term convergence is too broad and worn out because it refers to diverse phenomena, such as the production content for multiple media by only one professional, or cost cutting promoted by the media companies. “The problem is not convergence. It is our ability to find precision in our language to describe what convergence represents in Journalism” (FORD, 2007).

To address the myths and realities of convergence, the IfraNewsplex project director at the University of South Carolina, Randy Covington, says that the process does not concentrate on the limits of the technologies, but in content. For him, “media companies will be better served if they focus on the stories and not on the platforms” (COVINGTON, 2007).

In this article we will not focus on the different conceptual approaches to convergence. We will adopt Ford’s proposal and consider transmedia storytelling as a phenomenon which forms part of a larger process of media convergence.

### Transmedia Journalism

In February 2010, the director of *Starlight Entertainment* and a pioneer in the practice of intermedia narratives, Jeff Gomez, was in Brazil invited by the Globo Network. Asked about the possibility of applying the concepts of transmedia to journalism, he said:

The essence is the ability to convert stories in a way that will make you wait for the commercial to see what happens and even take action. But I think the main thing that can help is to allow a closer dialogue between the viewer, the journalist and the media company. When there is dialogue it is easier to make changes (GOMEZ, 2010)<sup>6</sup>.

Scolari (2011) advocates a similar point of view. For him, even though the concept has been used primarily in the entertainment world, it is necessary to think about its application outside the fictional universe.

I think it's time to expand the analytical look and incorporate into our transmedia studies other types of discourse, from the discourse of advertising to that of journalism, passing through the political or the documentary genre (SCOLARI, 2011).

The author emphasizes two main aspects of transmedia storytelling in this context:

- **The story is told by means of various media and platforms:** unlike the monomedia narrative, it starts in one medium and continues in others. The report takes advantage of the best of each medium to expand;

- **The prosumers<sup>7</sup> also collaborate in the construction of the narrative world:** to the report generated by the transmitter (from top to bottom), we should add the production from the bottom up, i.e. the collaboration of consumers, now converted into producers.

Scolari believes that journalism fits into these two premises:

You could say that journalism meets the two conditions that characterize cross-media narratives: we are in the presence of a story told by means of various media (web, RSS, blogs, radio, television, printed press, etc) and in turn is enriched by the contributions of users (blogs, comments, tweets, phone calls, letters to the editor, etc) (SCOLARI, 2011).

In an interesting debate set in their blogs, researchers Sam Ford (2006) and Aayush Iyer (2006) write about what they consider to be the concept of transmedia. Iyer addresses the issue from the point of view of advertising, while Ford directs the discussion to the future of printed media, his area of interest. In a post in May 2006, entitled "What I mean, when I say Transmedia", Iyer reflects on the differences between web

content, print media and electronic media. He stresses the need for a better understanding among the different types of publication, taking into consideration what characterizes each one of them and taking advantage of the differences and singularities.

What we see so far is a clear rift in thinking relating to the three forms of media. And although there are certain mash-up operations that do a fair job of integrating parts of them, we rarely see a true harmony of media. What would happen if a successful implementation of transmedia finally took place? The end of the rift; establishment of media singularities – true aggregation of resources; harmony of facets creating a universal view - leading to user loyalty (IYER, 2005).

Ford (2006) dialogues with Iyer (2006) on the role of print journalism in the process of transmedia.

As I come from a journalistic training, specifically the print media, I am intrigued by your statements related to the newspapers. Of course, the journalists of printed newspapers began to realize how their role is growing in society, but this view is just beginning to affect the kind of journalism they produce. A discussion we had at MIT was concerning the role of investigative journalism in the transmedia environment as the one we are entering ... would the printed media and their forms of distribution benefit the most from the investments in this process? But what would be the market for all this hodgepodge today? (FORD apud IYER, 2006).

In another *post* published on the *MIT Convergence Culture Consortium* (C3) in April 2007, Ford states that it is necessary to explain what *transmedia* journalism is and to differentiate it from what is called “uberjournalism” in which the reporter becomes a sort of handyman in the integrated newsroom of the different media of a media conglomerate. For him

The purpose of a transmedia news story is to inform readers in the best possible way, using a combination of forms of media to make them absorb information that makes sense in a world where these partnerships are becoming plausible on all platforms of content, and publication on the Internet provides the means by which a package of text, audio, video and images in a worldwide range of coverage can be assembled (FORD, 2007).

The use of the term transmedia would therefore be a way to distinguish the benefits of reporting news on multiple platforms from the corporate realities and their consequences, in an effort to not lose focus of what is important in this discussion, placing excessive emphasis on technology (technocentrism) or on the media (mediacentrism).

### **Characteristics of Transmedia Storytelling in Journalism**

Pernisa Junior (2010) finds it difficult to visualize the practice

of Transmedia Journalism. For this author, what you see, in most cases, are models of analog media being transported to the digital media. He supports Jenkins' thinking as a conceptual basis, but emphasizes the necessity of not clinging to the concept, since his whole theory is based on the world of entertainment and marketing. The author sees Transmedia Journalism as a conceptual proposal, which should be viewed from the standpoint of trial and error and not as a reality already consummated. Scolari (2011), in turn, considers transmedia as the journalism that travels across multiple platforms and counts on the collaboration of prosumers in its constitution.

When analyzing the possibility of applying the concepts of transmedia to journalism, Diniz (2011) cites Mauricio Mota, chief storytelling officer of *The Alchemists*, a group that develops products for clients such as Globo TV. During the seminar "Transmediation: Experiences in Brazil" which occurred in 2010 in Recife in partnership with Globe University and the postgraduate programs in Computer Science and Social Communication at the Federal University of Pernambuco (UFPE), Mauricio Mota gave the following opinion:

Journalism has a capacity for much faster delivery. It is much easier, in my opinion. It is easier to work with that kind of content. Taken as an example, the soap opera has to be launched, designed; it does not have a ready audience. The consumption of journalistic content is during 24 hours. The soap opera has a fixed time on the TV channel and can be propagated during 24 hours. Journalism is there all the time. (MOTA apud DINIZ, 2011, p. 7).

Diniz (2011) makes a critical reading of Mota's position, pointing mainly to the need for thinking about which issues can contribute to the implementation of a transmedia narrative in journalism. For him the time of narrative can also be a problem, since the event cannot be handled as the fictional world. In this sense, the reporting genre would be most conducive to containing parts of the narrative in other media. The main thing for this author, however, is that "the execution of a transmedia narrative in journalism should be considered always based on the interest it will arouse on the part of the public" (DINIZ, 2011, p. 11).

### **New scenarios: Immersive Journalism and NewsGames**

In our view, the application of transmedia storytelling in journalism should be understood not only as a process of production and circulation of informational content through the integrated use of multiple platforms, but also as an innovative form of production and circulation of informational content, which amalgamates genres and formats through



integration of the communicational logics of transmission and sharing.

We start from the epistemological discussions about discipline, interdiscipline and transdiscipline in order to expound our point of view. According to França (2002, p. 17), “disciplines are already consolidated areas of knowledge, are scientific fields that have already established a tradition.” Interdisciplinary studies or fields, in turn, “refer to the emergence of new topics that begin to be studied based on the areas already established” (FRANÇA, 2002, p. 17). The author differentiates the terms *interdisciplinary* and *transdisciplinary* emphasizing that “interdisciplinary refers to subjects or objects of reality that are perceived and dealt with by different sciences, without there being, in this case, any displacement or change in the disciplines’ theoretical referential” (FRANÇA, 2002, p. 18). Transdisciplinarity, in turn, comprises a different movement, “a particular issue or problem draws forth contributions from different disciplines, but these contributions are displaced from their field of origin and intercross in another place - in a new place. [...] It is this hybrid treatment, distinct, which constitutes the new object” (FRANÇA, 2002, p. 18).

Adopting a similar viewpoint, we suggest that media environments are consolidated fields of production and circulation of information which, throughout the 20th century, generated denominations such as radio journalism, television journalism, photojournalism etc. The intermedia perspective, following this line of reasoning, should refer to forms of production and circulation of information that are established at the intersection and complementation of different media environments, in this case without any displacement or change in the media referential. That is, the informational content is presented in a complementary form, for example, in the areas of television, radio and printed newspaper, in an integrated process in which each medium contributes with its own specificities to the combined production of information.

The transmedia perspective presupposes not only media complementation, although this is a relevant characteristic of the process, but also mainly the displacement of characteristics traditionally marked by media environments. It would thus constitute reticular zones for the mixing of genres and formats among digital media connections. Transmedia Journalism would therefore be established in the intermedia network interstices, and it is not possible to characterize it as specifically from any one single environment. On the other hand, some emerging formats, which are constituted by elements coming from various media

forms and which tend to spread through digital media connections, could be considered as forms of transmedia journalism, since they are processed in an intermedia dimension. This is the case, in our opinion, of experiments like immersive journalism and newsgames.

**Immersive Journalism** would be the production of news that allows people to experience as protagonists situations or events described in a news report. Although not new, the attempt to bring the news and the experience lived as a reporter as close as possible to the reader or viewer, the digital technologies expanded these forms of participation and interaction. The fundamental idea of Immersive Journalism would be to allow the participant to enter a representative scenario of the story, created virtually<sup>8</sup>. The perspective of the user's active participation in the construction of the narrative and the possibility of sharing it on social media are, in this case, the relevant aspects of its characterization as a transmedia experience.

Another possible form of transmedia journalism would be the **Newsgames**. According to the authors, Bogost, Ferrari and Scheweizer (apud SCOLARI, 2011), there are different types of newsgames. Current game, are productions based on everyday news, carried out quickly, using *Flash* or similar technologies, so as not to lose the rhythm of the news and distributed in news portals, in which they reach a massive public. Another type involves interactive infographics, allowing the user to change data and results of a system, providing different news and variables. A third would be the documentary genre, which allows the user to interact and work within a story; for example, putting himself in place of Lee Oswald to shoot President Kennedy, the controversial game *JFK Reloaded*<sup>9</sup>. Newsgames therefore refer to experimental aspects that can be incorporated in specific contexts that shape the transmedia narrative.

### Final thoughts

In our view, there are still many questions to be asked about the Newsgames and few really convincing experiences. We believe, however, that investigative journalism is a fertile field for the proposal, in particular the special reports that could experiment with forms of videogame and transmedia expansion of news, presenting themselves as an interactive extension of journalistic reports, within the transmedia concept proposed here. The same applies to Immersive Journalism.

In both cases (Newsgames and Immersive Journalism), the journalistic nature of the experiment specifies and redimensions itself in the tension which it establishes with media environments outside the

universe of news production - games and immersive environments. It is therefore a form of journalistic information that passes through a zone of media displacement because it is constructed in a new location. This would be, in our opinion, the outstanding feature of the transmedia journalistic narrative. Accordingly, every transmedia journalistic narrative would necessarily be intermedia, but not all intermedia journalistic narratives would be transmedia.

## NOTES

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- 2 ECONOMIST. The. How Oxford Style Debates Work. <<http://www.economist.com/debate/debates/overview/228>>. Accessed on: May 1, 2012.
- 3 <<http://www.technologyreview.com/biotech/13052>>. Accessed on: Dec. 13, 2011.
- 4 In Brazil, the terms transmedia narrative and transmedia storytelling are used interchangeably in the literature, translated as narrative.
- 5 In May 2011 the Record Media Group launched Record News on television, announced by the director of the R7 news website owned by the group as the first transmedia news program for television in Latin America <<http://portal.comunique-se.com.br/index.php/editorias/3-imprensa-a-comunicacao-65936-ao-vivo-na-internet-novo-jornal-da-record-news-sera-transmidia.html>>. Accessed on: March 29, 2012.
- 6 In: <<http://blogs.redeglobo.globo.com/tarolando/2010/02/05/pergunta-pergunta-esse-modelo-de-narrativa-transmidia-storytellingpode-ser-aplicado-ao-jornalismo-voce-conhece-algum-caso/>>.
- 7 Prosumer would be the consumer who produces content, or: producer + consumer. He is capable of sharing his experiences, creates trends and contributes to the process of the creation of products and services. The term was created by Alvin Toffler, author of the book "The Third Wave".
- 8 For examples in Immersive Journalism see: <<http://www.immersivejournalism.com/>>.
- 9 In <<http://jogos.uol.com.br/pc/fichas/jfk-reloaded.htm>>

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