

Digital Culture Research Programme

# Transmedia Literacy

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From Storytelling to Intercreativity  
in the Era of Distributed Authorship

Barcelona, December 10, 2013

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# **An Afterword**

## **From Media Literacy to Transmedia Literacy. An Afterward.**

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For several years now, when thinking of education and literature, we have seen that cultural references and practices are in a continuous process of transformation and redefinition, both because of the available digital tools, and because of several emerging channels of dissemination and distribution that reflect the increasingly dynamic abilities of mass (self)-production.

In a 2005 study by Amanda Lenhart and Mary Madden reported by Henry Jenkins, research emerged demonstrating that “more than one-half of all teens have created media content, and roughly one-third of teens who use the Internet have shared content they produced. In many cases, these teens are actively involved in what we are calling participatory cultures”. (Jenkins 2009, XI)

The participatory culture that Jenkins discusses represents an important milestone in the process of self-awareness and personal engagement in cultural production. The way people maintain a lifelong learning process no longer depends strictly on hierarchical structures devoted to educative purposes, but mostly on the socio-cultural environment of interpersonal and intermediated communication. Jenkins’ definition of participatory culture underlines specific aspects of this paradigm shift:

A participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices. In a participatory culture, members also believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another and, at the least, members care about others’ opinions of what they have created. (Jenkins 2009, XI)

If, on the one hand, this definition perfectly suits the attitudes of digital natives, conversely, it can be considered the most reliable definition of “prosuming audienc-

es”, meaning people, of different ages, active in the production of creative content versus being passive consumers.

If we reflect on the evolution of cultural technologies and the possibilities that different supports have offered in terms of expression, circulation, and engagement, we notice an exponential transformation of what is called today Media Literacy. If the birth of language represented the first footstep into a new social dimension of consciousness and communication, then such has undergone exponential growth with media-based literacy. Three hundred generations ago writing reframed the principal social patterns of everyday life. Almost thirty generations ago, the printing press led to another step toward mass communication and improved pedagogical tools. Then, suddenly, from the eighteenth century to the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the industrial revolution led to shortened lines of relation, interpersonal communication, and greater participation between people. With the constant growth of “new” new media (telegraph, photography, telephone, cinema, radio, television, web, computer, mobile, wearable devices, etc.) what has changed is not only the possibility extending knowledge in unpredictable directions, but also the ability to explore new frontiers of communication. What has changed is the architecture of intelligence itself (De Kerckhove 2001) and the intellectual development of the brain. (Wolf 2007)

Moving a step backward, in order to gradually interpret this change through the lens of media history, according to Castells (1996), we can say that we have started this paradigm shift by moving from the model of the “Gutenberg Galaxy” (press, mass distribution), to the revolution of the “McLuhan Galaxy” (new media, hypertext, collective participation, etc.).

The first result of top-down driven communication spread through mass-media channels (television, newspapers, radio and cinema among the most popular) and this created a specific kind of media spectatorship, educated and trained to comply with monolithic aspects of “pretailored” consumption. The emergence of a networked society (Castells 1996; Taylor 2001) and the rise of a convergence culture (Jenkins 2006), both sustained by an impressive amount of tools, platforms, and systems to enhance participation, creation, and the self-construction of content, favoured the migration of media audiences in search of any possible entertainment experiences they wanted. This change of perspective has produced two consequences. Firstly, it has affected the transformation of media producers and consumers into participants of the same market economy: as Jenkins suggests, “convergence culture is getting defined top-down by decisions being made in corporate boardrooms and bottom-up by decisions made in teenagers’ bedrooms” (2006b). Secondly, this transition has triggered a different form of understanding and learning, and a new asset of education for people at any levels and at all ages (not limited, thus, to the strictly scholarly perspective). This passage represents the last step of a shift which began in the last cen-

tury, when the dimension of literacy moved from a semiotically-measured geometry (De Saussure 1916; Hjelmslev 1966) to a dislocation and a deconstruction of contents and channels that give expression to new products (Derrida 1974; Bolter & Grusin 1999). Therefore, the impact of social media on narratives, narratology, and storytelling has redefined the meaning of readership and authorship, and the constant growth of different supports and tools freely available to wider audiences has favoured new experiences across media, in an informal environment where skills can improve in a transparent way.

From the ability to use, understand, and create media and communications in a variety of contexts, to a model of convergence culture where content fully permeates the audience's lifestyle, favouring the use of multiple platforms where every element contributes in a unique way to create and explore entities in a narrative universe, we can affirm that we have moved from the perspective of Media Literacy to a more pertinent Transmedia Literacy.

In this sense, Transmedia Culture defines a new cross-networked and amniotic literacy, considering that we are not facing a simple adaptation of different narratives from one media to another: different media and languages participate and contribute to the construction of a transmedia environment, where several audiences can express, through various supports, their participation in any possible emergent pattern in a socio-narrative space.

The concept of Transmedia Literacy emerges from the need of changing the analytical perspective of the previous models that had discovered different stages of development and evolution over the past years. The very idea of literacy has always been linked to the concept of written text and its method of analysis and creation. As we have said in brief, the advent of mass media has successively introduced an initial change of perspective, offering the opportunity to broaden the spectrum of skills and ways of learning through a variety of channels, languages, platforms, and formats to communicate and use different contents. What ensued was Media Literacy, and, afterwards, with a different depth, Digital Literacy, which has found widespread support in many educational settings, as it has enabled skills' developments in the use of new media, and has offered new forms of expression through registers that emerging technologies began to provide to users.

Media Literacy has been defined in many different ways. For example, Ofcom (the Independent regulator and competition authority for the UK communications industries) defines Media Literacy as "the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and create media in a variety of forms" (Livingstone 2004, 2). The very definition of Media Literacy proposed by Ofcom is based on the homonymous concept developed at the Aspen Institute in 1992. Media education does not concern only the ability to decode information available in a variety of media, but also to acquire the necessary abilities to respond critically and to produce the same amount of contents with the same tools.

Paul Gilster defined this digital literacy as: “the ability to understand and use information in multiple formats from a wide range of sources when it is presented via computers [...] (Not) only must you acquire the skill of finding things, you must also acquire the ability to use those things in your life. Acquiring digital literacy for Internet use involves mastering a set of core competencies. The most essential of these is the ability to make informed judgments about what you find on-line”. (Gilster 1997, 1)

Certainly, the users’ abilities — users that have become active audience and participative consumers (prosumer: union of producer and consumer) — and the constant sharing of contents and experiences, through mixed channels of decoding and fruition, has further shifted the focal point of the question, not focusing on tools or on media any longer, but on means of expression, production, and the consumption of the content itself.

A first concept that reorganizes the scenario in this direction is the “Transliteracy” one. This concept was born in the Anglo-Saxon world, between the two coasts of the Atlantic. In 2005, in the United States, Alan Liu developed and formalized the term “Transliterations” at the English Department of the University of California, Santa Barbara. Simplifying, according to Liu, “Transliterations” are the set of practices related to reading online. Almost simultaneously in England, at the University of Montfort, Sue Thomas, inspired by and reworking Liu’s work, proposed the concept of “Transliteracy”, defining it as “the ability to read, write and interact across a range of platforms, tools and media from signing and orality through handwriting, print, TV, radio and film, to digital social networks”. (Thomas et al. 2007, online)

Again simplifying, Sue Thomas focuses on interaction, on the practices of writing and communication. Although the term here does not relate to the concept of “Transmedia”, as to the meaning of “transliterate” (in *Transliteracy: Crossing Divides*, the authors clarify that for them the English word “transliteracy” comes from the verb “to transliterate”), the model carried out by Thomas and her colleagues opened up a first breakthrough towards a more comprehensive and interdisciplinary field of research. According to them transliteracy in fact offers a broader analysis of reading, writing, and interaction across a range of platforms, tools, media, and cultures: “Transliteracy does not replace, but rather, contains the ‘Media Literacy’ and also the ‘Digital Literacy’”. (*ibidem*)

If the concept of “Transliteracy” has a double origin (on the one hand the American approach of Alan Liu, conversely, the British one proposed by Sue Thomas), the two models, though complementary, offer two different contents. To these two approaches, according to Alexandre Serres, it would be necessary to add a third, characteristic of libraries and of certain Anglo-Saxon universities, where the transliteracy concept covers the set of digital skills, especially communication skills, proper to information processing and social networks. (Serres 2012)



In parallel to this scenario, a complementary one has been developed, which has gradually captured the signs of change: from production modes to consumption practices of content. This model is one that sketches, within different perspectives, the transmedia concept.

The term transmedia was used for the first time by Marsha Kinder in 1991. Kinder used the term “Transmedia Intertextuality” to precisely define and discuss how narrative for children had moved into different forms of “media” (movies, television, and video games) and presented different levels of interaction. The prefix *trans-* (also present in “Transliteracy”), in fact, suggests the idea of passage, to go further, to change from one condition to another, and to exchange. Since Kinder’s definition, Transmedia has normally been accompanied with “storytelling”, assuming a specific connotation on how narratives based on different channels and multiple languages are constructed.

Henry Jenkins was the first researcher to formalize the concept of Transmedia Storytelling. Already in 2006, Jenkins prefaced, in his book *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide*, the change of the user’s role, of the market, and the ways in which new contents were produced in a fully transmedia context. According to Jenkins, “Transmedia Storytelling represents a process where 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 2007, online)

The unique contribution made by different media is also highlighted by Marie-Laure Ryan. According to her, the medium-term embraces a wide range of phenomena and should distinguish between: a) media as channels or information systems/communication/entertainment; and b) media as material or technical means of expression (Ryan 2003). Ryan, indebted to McLuhan’s expression “The medium is the message”, reminds us that the use of each medium influences the type of information that can be transmitted and, therefore, may alter the conditions of reception.

Moving from an idea of transmedia (storytelling) as an example of knowledge and production (Jenkins) and Sue Thomas’ vision (who also saw in “transliteracy” an open source model intended to evolve over time), the concept of Transmedia Literacy will offer a set of theoretical and analytical tools to be able to acquire the skills needed to critically understand the characters and the possibilities of the emerging culture.

The first International Seminar “Transmedia Literacy. From Storytelling to Intercreativity in the Era of Distributed Authorship” aims to function as a starting point to reflect on, analyse, and discuss Transmedia Literacy as an emerging but fundamental literacy for contemporary society and culture. In order to capture and study the models of this change, the seminar aims at building a research model and a research hub on the topic of Transmedia Literacy, an interdisciplinary, interconnected, and immer-

sive framework, in which the goal was not to analyse and interpret the transposition of different narrative forms from one channel to another, but to develop a framework of joint observations and participations, where different media platforms, languages, and formats contribute to forming a meaningful environment for users.

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