DIGI-Story
Digital Storytellers: Empowering Youth Through Media Literacy and Transmedia

Co-funded by the European Union

Transmedia narratives in the social media era: From passive audiences to participatory digital cultures

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Abstract

The transformation of the contemporary media ecosystem has altered not only how stories are distributed but also how audiences interact with, reinterpret and produce content. Transmedia storytelling has emerged within this context as an approach in which elements of a narrative are distributed across different media and platforms, with each medium contributing to the construction of a broader narrative universe. Social media have strengthened this model by facilitating participation, circulation, interaction and user-generated content. This article reviews key literature on transmedia storytelling and examines its relationship with social media, participatory culture and media literacy. Particular attention is paid to young people, whose everyday media practices increasingly combine consumption, production and circulation of digital content. The review suggests that transmedia approaches may offer valuable opportunities for education and media literacy, although effective implementation requires pedagogical planning, critical digital competences and attention to inequalities in participation.

Keywords: transmedia storytelling, social media, media literacy, transmedia literacy, participatory culture, youth, digital storytelling.

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1. Introduction

Digitalisation has profoundly transformed contemporary storytelling. Stories are increasingly constructed, distributed and experienced through interconnected combinations of video, social networks, websites, podcasts, games, images and user-generated content rather than through a single medium. At the same time, audiences have acquired greater possibilities for commenting, sharing, modifying and producing media content.

These transformations form part of what Jenkins (2006) conceptualised as convergence culture, characterised by the circulation of content across multiple media platforms, the interaction between media industries and the migratory behaviour of audiences. Within this environment, the distinction between media producer and consumer becomes less rigid. Audiences may actively search for information, establish connections between fragments of a narrative and participate in communities built around shared media experiences.

One of the concepts most closely associated with these transformations is transmedia storytelling. Jenkins (2006, 2007) describes transmedia storytelling as a process in which integral elements of a narrative are systematically distributed across multiple channels, ideally with each medium making a distinctive contribution to the overall experience.

Consequently, transmedia storytelling should not be confused with simply reproducing identical content across several platforms. A story presented through a video, an Instagram post, a podcast and an infographic is not necessarily transmedia. A genuinely transmedia approach involves narrative expansion and complementarity: different media contribute different pieces, perspectives or experiences to a broader narrative world.

This distinction is particularly relevant within the current social media ecosystem. Platforms facilitate the movement of stories between media while simultaneously enabling audiences to interact with them and produce their own contributions. Understanding this relationship is increasingly important for media literacy initiatives aimed at young people.

2. Understanding transmedia storytelling

Although storytelling across different media existed before digital technologies, the concept of transmedia storytelling acquired particular relevance through the work of Henry Jenkins. In Convergence Culture, Jenkins (2006) connected transmedia storytelling with wider transformations involving media convergence, participatory culture and collective intelligence.

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Rather than simply adapting the same story from one medium to another, transmedia storytelling expands a narrative universe. A video might introduce an event, a social media account could present the perspective of a particular character, a podcast could explore additional background information and an interactive activity could allow audiences to investigate another dimension of the story.

Scolari (2009) further developed this concept by examining transmedia storytelling as a structure involving multiple media languages and narrative worlds. From this perspective, audiences must interpret information distributed across different media and reconstruct relationships between different components of the narrative.

Transmedia narratives therefore represent more than a technological innovation. They reflect a transformation in the relationship between narratives, media and audiences.

Scolari (2013) emphasises two particularly important characteristics: the expansion of stories across different media and the active participation of audiences. Users may therefore become involved in expanding narrative worlds through fan fiction, videos, discussions, memes, images, remixes and other forms of user-generated content.

The development of social media has substantially increased the possibilities for this participatory dimension.

3. Transmedia meets social media

Social networks occupy a particularly important position within contemporary transmedia ecosystems because they simultaneously function as channels of distribution, spaces for interaction and environments for content creation.

Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube and other digital environments allow narrative fragments to circulate rapidly between users and communities. However, their importance for transmedia storytelling extends beyond distribution. They enable audiences to comment on stories, reinterpret them, share them with different communities and generate new content around them.

This development can be understood through the transition from distribution to circulation described by Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013). Their concept of spreadable media emphasises that audiences play an active role in determining how media content travels through networked environments. Users decide what to share, with whom, in what context and sometimes with what modifications.

The social value of content therefore does not depend exclusively on the original producer. Meaning can also emerge through circulation and interaction.

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This logic fits particularly well with transmedia storytelling. A narrative fragment distributed through social media may lead users towards other components of the narrative while simultaneously generating comments, responses, remixes and derivative content.

The boundaries between narrative consumption and production consequently become increasingly permeable.

4. From consumers to prosumers

The participatory nature of contemporary digital environments has encouraged researchers to reconsider traditional distinctions between media producers and consumers.

Within participatory cultures, individuals do not simply receive professionally produced messages. They may create, circulate and reinterpret media products within their communities. Social media have substantially lowered some of the technical barriers associated with this process.

This phenomenon is especially relevant among younger generations.

Research conducted by Scolari, Masanet, Guerrero-Pico and Establés (2018) identified a broad range of transmedia skills developed by teenagers through their everyday interactions with digital media. These competences include areas related to content production, management, social interaction, narrative and aesthetic understanding, media and technology, and risk management.

An important element of this research is that many of these competences are acquired outside formal educational institutions. Young people learn by doing, solving problems, imitating other users, consulting tutorials, participating in online communities and exchanging knowledge with peers.

Guerrero-Pico, Masanet and Scolari (2019) further demonstrated that young media producers cannot be considered a homogeneous group. Their study identified different profiles of teenage “produsers”, ranging from casual creators to more aspirational and expert producers. Participation in digital culture therefore varies substantially in terms of knowledge, motivation and production skills.

This finding has important educational implications. Familiarity with social networks should not automatically be interpreted as comprehensive digital competence.

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5. Transmedia literacy and education

The concept of transmedia literacy attempts to connect these emerging media practices with education.

Traditional approaches to media literacy have frequently focused on teaching learners how to critically analyse media messages. Transmedia literacy broadens this perspective by examining the competences young people already develop within participatory media environments and considering how these competences might be incorporated into educational practices.

Scolari et al. (2018) propose moving attention from what media are doing to young people towards understanding what young people are doing with media. This does not mean abandoning critical media education. Rather, it involves recognising informal learning practices and using them as potential bridges between learners' everyday digital experiences and formal education.

This approach has subsequently influenced the concept of transmedia education. Scolari, Lugo Rodríguez and Masanet (2019) propose moving from user-generated content towards student-generated content, creating educational situations in which learners participate actively in media production.

A transmedia learning activity, for example, might begin with a short fictional situation presented through video. Learners could then investigate additional information through online resources, analyse characters' social media profiles, produce a podcast presenting alternative perspectives, create visual content explaining key concepts and collectively expand the narrative.

The educational value would not lie merely in using several technologies. It would derive from requiring learners to research, interpret, connect, create and communicate information across different media languages.

6. Educational opportunities

Research into digital storytelling and transmedia education suggests several potential educational benefits.

A systematic review of educational digital storytelling by Wu and Chen (2020), covering 57 studies, identified outcomes across affective, cognitive, conceptual, academic, technological, linguistic and social dimensions. Digital storytelling has been applied across different educational levels and frequently encourages learners to assume an active role in producing meaningful content.

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More specifically, research on transmedia learning suggests that transmedia approaches can support pedagogical principles associated with constructivism and connectivism and can contribute to motivating educational experiences. Nevertheless, the literature also stresses that designing effective transmedia learning environments is complex and depends on multiple pedagogical and contextual factors.

Social networks may add another dimension by connecting formal educational activities with communication practices already familiar to many learners. They can provide environments for collaboration, publication, peer feedback and dissemination.

For educators and youth workers, transmedia storytelling can therefore offer an opportunity to transform media literacy from an exclusively analytical exercise into a combination of critical analysis and creative production.

Students can examine why certain content attracts attention, how narratives change between platforms, how algorithms influence visibility, how information circulates through networks and how ethical considerations should influence their own production practices.

7. Challenges and critical considerations

The potential of transmedia storytelling should nevertheless not lead to an uncritical celebration of digital participation.

Firstly, access to social networks does not guarantee advanced media literacy. Young people may be highly competent in particular platforms while lacking other competences related to information verification, privacy, copyright, ethical communication or understanding algorithmic systems.

Secondly, participation is unequal. Guerrero-Pico et al. (2019) demonstrate considerable variation in teenagers' media production abilities. Educational activities should therefore avoid assuming that all learners possess equivalent technological or narrative skills.

Thirdly, the educational use of social media raises questions concerning privacy, personal data, digital footprints and platform governance. Activities involving young people require particular care regarding the information they publish and the platforms through which participation occurs.

There is also a pedagogical challenge. Using several platforms does not automatically produce meaningful transmedia learning. A poorly designed activity may simply fragment information across technologies without creating meaningful relationships between the different components.

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Systematic reviews of social media in education similarly indicate that the field still requires stronger connections between technology use and pedagogical theory. Technology should therefore respond to educational objectives rather than determine them.

Finally, social networks operate through commercial infrastructures whose algorithms influence what content becomes visible. Critical transmedia literacy should consequently include not only storytelling and production skills but also an understanding of how platforms organise attention, participation and circulation.

8. Relevance to DIGI-Story

These findings provide an important conceptual basis for DIGI-Story – Digital Storytellers: Empowering Youth Through Media Literacy and Transmedia.

The project starts from the premise that young people should not only learn how to consume digital information more critically but also understand their role as producers and distributors of content.

This perspective is particularly relevant because research carried out within DIGI-Story in Spain, Portugal and the Czech Republic identified high levels of digital engagement among young people alongside gaps related to media literacy, responsible online behaviour and content creation.

Transmedia storytelling can provide a practical bridge between these two dimensions. Instead of addressing media literacy only through theoretical explanations, young people can explore digital communication through the production and interpretation of interconnected narratives.

Within DIGI-Story, transmedia narratives can therefore be understood not simply as communication products but as learning environments. Videos, podcasts, comics, infographics and other digital formats can present complementary perspectives while encouraging young people to navigate between media languages and reflect critically on how digital stories are constructed and circulated.

This approach corresponds closely with the wider concept of transmedia literacy: recognising the media competences young people already possess while providing structured educational opportunities to develop them critically, ethically and creatively.

9. Conclusions

Transmedia storytelling reflects a broader transformation of contemporary media culture. Stories increasingly circulate across interconnected platforms, while audiences participate in interpreting, sharing and producing content.

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Social media have intensified these processes by providing infrastructures where narrative circulation and audience participation occur simultaneously. Their role in transmedia storytelling is therefore not limited to promoting content; social platforms can become components of narrative worlds and spaces in which audiences contribute to their expansion.

For education and youth work, this creates significant opportunities. Transmedia approaches can connect formal learning with media practices that young people encounter in their everyday lives while encouraging research, creativity, collaboration, critical thinking and digital production.

However, the literature also suggests that technological familiarity should not be confused with media literacy. Differences in skills, privacy concerns, algorithmic mediation, misinformation and unequal forms of participation must remain central considerations.

The educational potential of transmedia storytelling therefore lies not in multiplying platforms, but in designing meaningful connections between narratives, media, participation and critical reflection.

This perspective is particularly relevant for media literacy initiatives such as DIGI-Story. Helping young people become digital storytellers ultimately means helping them understand not only how to tell stories through digital media, but also how those media shape the stories they encounter, create and share.

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