
Employer expectations of public relations graduates' transmedia storytelling proficiency

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Abstract

The rapid evolution of information and communication technologies presents challenges for public relations educators as they seek to develop pedagogical approaches that balance theoretical concepts with a practical or 'working' knowledge of new media platforms. The incipient practice of transmedia storytelling in public relations contexts offers a timely example of this pedagogical flashpoint. In this study, the authors explored the incorporation of transmedia storytelling within current public relations practice and employer expectations of the transmedia storytelling proficiency of recent public relations graduates.

The study took a qualitative approach with findings based on 15 semi-structured interviews with senior public relations professionals from four Australian states and five industry sectors. Findings suggest transmedia storytelling campaigns of varying complexity are a common characteristic of contemporary public relations practice, and that digitally literate graduates who can provide evidence of a solid theoretical knowledge and practical skills in relation to transmedia storytelling are highly sought after by the practitioners who took part in the study.

Introduction

A fundamental and ancient form of human communication, storytelling has emerged in public relations practice as a powerful reputation and relationship building action that seeks to create emotional bonds between organisations and their stakeholders (Dowling, 2006; Gill, 2011; Heath & Palenchar, 2009). At a time when organisational stories are often told over

multiple new and traditional media channels, both communication practitioners and educators are required to be proficient in transmedia storytelling. This includes possessing abilities to "think across media platforms" when producing content (Jenkins, 2010, p. 943) and to interpret a network logic that adapts to increasingly complex interactions and patterns (Castells, 1996).

This paper discusses the findings of a pilot study of public relations practitioners' expectations of the transmedia storytelling proficiency of recent graduates. In-depth interviews with senior public relations practitioners confirmed participants are currently developing campaigns that align with the concept of transmedia storytelling articulated by new media theorist Henry Jenkins (2006, 2010). In addition, participants suggested a desire for recent graduates to possess both the knowledge and competencies required to develop key aspects of transmedia storytelling campaigns. The study's findings point to areas of future research including investigations into how transmedia storytelling theory and practice are taught in public relations programmes and pedagogical approaches that allow future graduates to adapt to the accelerating pace of digital media innovation, a condition that is emerging as a key challenge within public relations practice during the network society era.

Background

Transmedia storytelling presents an attractive strategic option for public relations practitioners. The communication of a singular narrative across both new and traditional media channels enables publics and stakeholders to be co-creators in the organisational storytelling

process, thereby increasing their sense of engagement with an organisation and its messaging. Tourism Queensland's Best Job in the World campaign (http://www.queenslandholidays.com.au/experiences/best-job/best-job_home.cfm) offers an example of transmedia storytelling in which stakeholders played an integral role in the development of a brand story that unfolded over several media channels (Bhurji, 2012).¹ The US Army has used the approach as part of its internal communication strategy (Cianciolo, Cianciolo, Morris, Prevou & Morris, 2007), while the Ford Motor Company's My Ford Story campaign (Stanchak, 2013) suggests the benefits of transmedia storytelling as a crisis management response.

While the aim of being 'on message' across different media channels is not a particularly new concept for public relations professionals, the development of a singular organisational or campaign narrative that focuses on building emotional bonds via a co-creation process with stakeholders represents an incipient public relations activity. The practice is referred to as transmedia storytelling in this paper, however a degree of "semantic chaos" surrounds the term (Scolari, 2009, p. 587) with the analogous terms 'multi-platform storytelling', 'cross-media storytelling' and 'integrated storytelling' emerging in practitioner and academic discourses.

Despite a lack of consistency regarding its name, transmedia storytelling is attracting a growing amount of practitioner attention. Communication industry publications have been quick to identify the beneficial outcomes of the approach, yet detail on how to translate the logic of transmedia storytelling into practice is less apparent. As such, academics are poised to play a pivotal role in the establishment of this emerging field. A challenge inherent in both the practice and teaching of transmedia storytelling is the emergence of a growing number of

communication channels, many of which require medium-specific knowledge and skills. It is conceivable that a transmedia campaign could include a number of non-traditional public relations channels including social networking pages, image-sharing sites, microblogging, blogging, smartphone apps and online multiplayer games in concert with traditional public relations vehicles, such as media relations and events.

Literature review

The transmedia storytelling concept was first discussed in detail by Jenkins (2006) in *Convergence culture* to describe an emerging trend in entertainment content development. In a subsequent article specifically on transmedia storytelling pedagogy he states:

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. (2010, p. 944)

Jenkins notes that transmedia storytelling is more than merely adaptation, which reproduces the narrative with minimal changes when communicated through an additional channel, but instead allows each media form to evoke an element of novelty that sits within the bounds of an overarching story. Importantly, Jenkins stresses the value of developing a 'mother ship' vessel for the story that is complemented by related narrative 'extensions', which are often co-created with the audience when, for example, social media are employed.

Jenkins and others have expanded upon the transmedia storytelling concept to suggest its utility in non-entertainment fields. Tenderich (2013) has played an important role in translating transmedia storytelling from the entertainment realm to the field of marketing communication by suggesting that a brand can be "packaged into an integrated narrative, which is dispersed in unique contributions across multiple media channels" (p. 2). Scolari (2009) adds to the discussion, suggesting

¹ The Queensland 'Best job in the world' campaign has now become an Australia-wide Tourism Australia Best Jobs in the World campaign, see <http://www.tourism.australia.com/campaigns/Global-Youth-about-the-campaign.aspx>.

companies that embrace transmedia branding seek to “create a symbolic universe endowed with meaning” (p. 599). Both authors are more concerned with brand experiences than reputation building, yet their arguments indicate the relevance of transmedia storytelling outside entertainment industries.

The organisational application of transmedia storytelling has occurred within the context, and as a result, of the network society, an era Castells and Cardoso (2005) describe as globalised and scaffolded by digital technology. According to Castells (1996), the introduction of new media platforms during this period has rapidly accelerated with technologies no longer existing as largely static objects but as “tools to be processed and developed” (p. 30). This is evident in the fast-paced innovation of social media platforms that have morphed quickly from blogs to microblogs, video ‘posting’ to image ‘pinning’, to name a few examples. However, this is not to say that new media technologies make their predecessors obsolete (Levy, 2001). It should be noted that transmedia storytelling in a public relations context differentiates itself from social media campaigning by incorporating more established techniques including media relations.

While minimal research has been undertaken into transmedia storytelling in a public relations context, the value of storytelling as a reputation and relationship building mechanism has become apparent. Dowling (2006) argues that effective corporate stories can help build reputation capital if indicative of “a valued mission and good morality and behavior” (p. 98). Gill’s review of literature suggests corporate storytelling results in a “deeper engagement” with internal and external stakeholders (2011, p. 13). Bhurji (2012) claims that in contemporary practice, “the craft of storytelling” has become more even valuable, and calls on public relations professionals to build their understanding of the broader media and marketing landscape at a time when boundaries between public relations and advertising are blurring.

In our own reviewing, literature on the transmedia storytelling knowledge and skills desired by employers of recent public relations graduates was not found, however a more general US study of practitioners’ views of public relations graduate skills indicates that while technical competencies, such as the ability to use social media in an organisational context, are becoming increasingly important, traditional public relations skills, including writing, communication and strategic thinking, remain more highly valued by employers (Paskin, 2013). This finding highlights the importance of a broad rather than a specific skill set. The study concluded that public relations educators should be cognisant of the concept of convergence in addition to teaching students ‘the basics’ before exposing students to newer forms of communication. In a somewhat surprising finding given the widespread use of new media platforms by Australians, a study of the Australian public relations sector by de Bussy and Wolf (2009) suggested practitioners were reticent to embrace social media. Neither of these studies focused on the communication of stories in an integrated fashion across new and traditional media; as such the imperative to understand the extent of transmedia storytelling practice presents an opportunity to fill a gap in existing literature during a period of technological change which is characterised by an emphasis on the interplay between technological and non-technological networks (van Dijk, 2006).

A research gap can also be identified with regard to transmedia storytelling pedagogy in a public relations context although the topic has been covered in a more general sense. In an article on his experiences of teaching transmedia storytelling to media students, Jenkins stressed the importance of integrating theory and practice. He states:

Too often, theory and practice are held apart rather than exploring how creators draw on theory to inform every aspect of their work, even if they use different language to discuss the concepts than might emerge in the classroom setting. (2010, p. 946)

While Jenkins does not specifically reflect on which practical skills should be taught, the value of 'real world' learning is highlighted. Specifically, he advises transmedia storytelling educators to involve practitioners in the teaching process, as "students need to be exposed to the more pragmatic aspects of how transmedia works" (ibid, p. 946). The value of practical skills has been more overtly argued by Alexander (2004) who suggests public relations educators must possess a thorough grounding in new technologies use in order to accommodate hands-on relationship management learning. However, it can be argued there is more to the achievement of digital literacy than skills-based learning. Buckingham (2006) states that in an educational context, digital literacy should extend beyond the technical aspects of using new media to include "a much broader *critical* understanding, which addresses the textual characteristics of media alongside their social, economic and cultural implications" (author's emphasis) (p. 273). While not the focus of this paper, the importance of teaching not just media literacy but also digital literacy is an important discussion point with regard to transmedia storytelling pedagogy.

Research questions

1. How prevalent is the use of transmedia storytelling in current public relations practice?
2. What are employer expectations of public relations graduates' transmedia proficiency?

Methodology

Qualitative research enables exploration and exposure of meaning and was deemed the most appropriate approach for this pilot study (Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano & Morales, 2007; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Purposive sampling was used (Creswell, 2007) to conduct 15 semi-structured phone interviews (Minichiello, Aroni & Hays, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008) with public relations professionals during a two-week period in early 2013. Monash University granted ethics approval. Participants read an explanatory

statement prior to the interview and were informed their involvement in the project was voluntary and confidential. Practitioners were primarily selected from Victoria (12), with the states of New South Wales (1), Queensland (1) and Western Australia (1) also represented. Participants were employed in five different organisational categories: public relations agencies (5), not-for-profit (4), corporate (2), education (2) and government (1). All participants were senior public relations professionals currently or previously involved in the recruitment of public relations graduates. The interview questions pertained to the following fields of inquiry: current practice, strategy development, theory versus practice, and graduate employability. Digital recordings were made for all interviews with the researchers transcribing responses prior to a coding process that assisted the development of themes in response to the study's research questions (Weerakkody, 2009).

Limitations

The small sample and unequal representation from locations and sectors presented limitations in this study. With both researchers based in Melbourne, most of the participants were from there or surrounding locations. Furthermore, most participants were from agencies and the not-for-profit sector. With regard to the discussion of theory, participants were asked whether they thought it was important for recent graduates to be aware of the theories that inform transmedia storytelling and not prompted further as to which theories. Further investigation of practitioner views on what these theories are would form part of a larger future study.

Discussion and findings

Four key themes emerged from analysis of research data. The study established the prevalence of transmedia storytelling with all participants stating they had recently developed campaigns that reflected established definitions of transmedia storytelling projects (Jenkins, 2010; Tenderich, 2013). In terms of strategy development, participants said that while recent graduates were expected to possess a high level

of digital media expertise, senior practitioners predominantly led planning processes. The majority of participants claimed knowledge of the theories that inform transmedia storytelling was important provided it was complemented by practical case studies or work integrated learning experiences. In addition, participants placed a high value on practical transmedia storytelling skills that illustrated 'real world' campaign experience.

Current practice

When asked about their understanding of the term transmedia storytelling, 11 participants said they were unfamiliar with or "sort of" aware of the name transmedia storytelling yet suggested they were capable of "figuring out" a definition. Responses included "telling a story over old and new media", "working across media" or "telling the same story in lots of different ways". One participant said her agency described the practice as "cross-media PR" rather than transmedia storytelling, an insight that suggests a degree of "semantic chaos" (Scolari, 2009, p. 587) surrounds the term in a public relations context.

All participants confirmed their organisations had developed and executed what could be described as transmedia storytelling projects, with campaigns exhibiting diverse layers of complexity in terms of the number and use of media channels employed. A government vaccination programme for schools that used animated video to attract the attention of children in addition to brochures, fact sheets and expert videos to communicate with parents was described as a recent transmedia storytelling project by one agency participant. A more extensive campaign developed by an in-house communication team at a state based museum featured a curator's blog that gave the 'inside story' of an exhibition. This central communication piece was linked to pop-up workshop events, a Twitter feed that updated followers on exhibition activities, image sharing sites for people to upload imagery related to the exhibition, an

exhibition Facebook page, media relations tactics and advertising activity.

The discussion of campaigns exemplified by the aforementioned examples suggests participants have embraced transmedia storytelling to varying degrees, with projects ranging from the application of two or three channels to more extensive campaigns that incorporate numerous platforms in addition to publics being provided with the agency to co-create an organisational story. Ten of the 15 examples of recent transmedia storytelling projects discussed by practitioners communicated emotive campaign topics, such as public health awareness and entertainment industries promotion, in order to encourage stakeholders to "share their own stories", "be interactive" or "co-create". The aim of these campaigns to be "interactive and engaging", as Tenderich puts it when discussing the related field of branding (2013, para. 5), reflects a normative desire on behalf of participants to achieve 'best practice' using the Excellence Theory model of two-way symmetrical communication (Grunig & Grunig, 1992).

A total of 26 media channels were mentioned as components of transmedia storytelling campaigns. Blogs, microblogs, social networking sites and online video featured prominently. Image-sharing sites, e-newsletters and organisational web pages were discussed to a lesser extent. None of the respondents mentioned smartphone apps or video games. All discussed traditional approaches to media relations as a key element of the transmedia storytelling media mix. While perceptions regarding the specific challenges involved in simultaneously negotiating digital and non-digital networks were not part of this study, it can be suggested that such a large number of integrated platforms calls on practitioners and educators to be cognisant of network conditions that adapt to increasingly complex interactions (Castells, 1996). Furthermore, in addition to comprehending the network logic that facilitates transmedia storytelling efficacy, the ability to use an ever-expanding array of digital media tools also presents itself as a key area of contemporary practice. While this observation might suggest

educators face the prospect of imparting media platform knowledge and skills that are obsolete by the time a student has graduated, it is important to note that much of this innovation, according to Castells (1996), is the result of the adaptation of previous technologies rather than the realisation of an entirely new object (p. 30). Levy (2001) concurs, stating it is possible to predict transformations based on the past (p. 7), an assertion that suggests practitioners would benefit from being well versed in the history of both media and digital artifacts.

Strategy development

The researchers posed questions regarding the expected strategic planning proficiency of recent graduates in order to understand what role, if any, recent graduates played in the creation of transmedia storytelling strategy. Ten participants reported that a team of practitioners from all hierarchical levels was involved in the initial stages of planning transmedia storytelling campaigns, such as brainstorming sessions, however, senior members of staff are ultimately responsible for driving strategy development. Diverse opinions were recorded on whether graduates should possess the ability to develop strategy for transmedia storytelling campaigns. The following respondent, for example, believed strategy was a skill that should be developed over time when working with more senior practitioners: “It’s important but unrealistic because I don’t think it’s something that you can learn without being in the situation where you have to actually do the job.”

However, nine participants stated the ability to develop an effective strategy is a fundamental skill that should be acquired at university with graduates expected to be aware of the different channels available and how to produce content that can be refashioned to effectively fit each one.

Organisations often look to young people/graduates to fulfil social media requirements because they assume they will have those skills. It is expected that traditional media is complemented with transmedia. It is

part of everyday business for PR graduates these days.

These observations indicate that while recent graduates may not be involved in the finalisation of campaign strategies, their knowledge is valuable with regard to early brainstorming sessions and may expose practitioners to new ideas on how to approach digital media platforms. The ability to provide this knowledge can be linked to the building of digital literacy while at university in order to ‘filter up’ relevant expertise on nascent technologies when in the workplace. The suggestion that recent graduates play a role in researching transmedia storytelling campaigns is another valuable insight provided by three participants that can be linked to the importance of understanding the network society concept of collective intelligence, which describes the “sharing of memory, imagination and experience through the widespread exchange of knowledge in real time” (Levy, 2001, p. 8). As interpreters of the broader trends that act as both a strategic and creative foundation for transmedia projects, it is imperative that recent graduates are capable of drawing insights from the collective intelligence of publics and translate this awareness into a “storyworld” that traverses media platforms and incorporates diverse perspectives (Tenderich, 2013, p. 3).

Theory versus practice

When questioned about the relationship of theory to transmedia storytelling campaign development, eight participants said it was important for recent graduates to have a strong theoretical grounding of transmedia storytelling. An emphasis was placed on framing theoretical knowledge with ‘real world’ case studies in order for graduates to be ‘work ready’, for example:

I am a great believer that theory doesn't make too much sense unless you can see it in practice. As long as the theory is being accompanied with examples of real life ways in which it's actually happening in the industry, then yes, I believe the theory is necessary.

The belief that theory plays a role in explaining practice was identified. For instance, one participant deemed theoretical knowledge as a valuable learning outcome that was capable of assisting recent graduates to achieve “more of an understanding of the process, how things work and why we do it”. In addition, a quarter of the sample reinforced the need for theory pertaining to transmedia storytelling to be balanced with work integrated learning experiences. “You need more than just theory, graduates need to be work ready and have real experience, theory is the basis of doing, but you also need some doing behind you.”

The reasons offered as to why knowledge of theory constitutes a valuable asset for early career practitioners varied across the sample. Some participants believed theory to be important as it provides recent graduates with the competency to engage with audiences across communication channels, understand that discrete stakeholders or publics may use media channels differently and comprehend the difference between private and personal use of digital media. The ability of theory to help recent graduates tailor their writing to different media platforms was also discussed. One practitioner emphasised the relationship between theory and strategy by suggesting exposure to theory while at university facilitated evidence based reasoning, an imperative for the profession as “PR has suffered in the past from people having a gut feel rather than basing their strategy on fact”. These participant observations highlight the relevance of Buckingham’s (2006) suggestion that digital literacy can be achieved by extending traditional media literacy concepts of “language”, “representation”, “production” and “audience” into the new media realm (pp. 267-268) to critically engage with digital platforms and understand their relationship to traditional media channels.

Participants discussed a number of desirable practical transmedia storytelling competencies with the majority emphasising the imperative of recent graduates to be multi-skilled as opposed to predominantly being competent in traditional skills, such as media

release writing. Echoing Paskin’s (2013) study of US public relations practitioners’ perceptions of graduating students’ skills, writing proficiency was seen as desirable by participants, with many highlighting the value of recent graduates being able to customise their writing when developing content for various new and traditional media platforms. The ability to use the content management systems that sit behind websites, blogs and intranets, in addition to the capacity to ‘customise’ social media pages, was also discussed. But just how many practical skills do early career practitioners need to make an impact on prospective employers? The wide array of new media platforms mentioned, many of which participants believed should be taught in public relations courses, raises the possibility that any course inclusive of all of these tools may leave little time for critical analysis. While this topic is worthy of further research it may be worth nothing Buckingham’s (2006) suggestion that “critical understandings can and should be developed through the experience of media production” (p. 274) in order for students to learn how to “think across media platforms” (Jenkins, 2010, p. 943) by doing, rather than through critical engagement in isolation.

Graduate employability

Participants were asked whether they would employ a recent graduate who had a sound theoretical knowledge of transmedia storytelling rather than the practical skills required to implement transmedia campaigns. Ten participants stated that practical skills were a necessity that allowed graduates to “hit the ground running”. Three respondents said practical skills could be developed “on the job” so the graduate could be moulded to fit the distinctive style and quality expected by their particular organisation. Availability of resources appeared to shape responses across the sample. Respondents with small public relations teams, representing smaller organisations, or from the not-for-profit sector (or all three) answered that they would not employ a recent graduate without the practical skills necessary to execute transmedia campaigns. This may be due to a lack of

resources for training a newly employed graduate. This group also believed universities should include practical training within public relations pedagogy. Conversely, participants from larger organisations were more likely to employ graduates with strong theoretical knowledge, but limited practical skills. “If I was working in an organisation that had the resources to be able to coach that person along, yes; otherwise I wouldn't have the resources to coach unless I was using limited channels.”

Conclusion

Levy's (2001) observation that aspects of the network society represent both a poison and a cure is an apt one with regard to the discussion of the impact of transmedia storytelling on both practitioners and educators. For practitioners, an ever-increasing number of interrelated, deep engagement evoking media tools provides new methods of achieving dialogue with stakeholders and publics, yet simultaneously requires an intricate knowledge of the application and sometimes high risk effects of continually evolving platforms. Accordingly, developing public relations pedagogy that negotiates these conditions presents itself as challenging task for educators who are required to locate the delicate balance of theory and practice.

In order to provide greater insight into the incipient field of transmedia storytelling, this pilot study indicates Australian public relations practitioners are navigating new media channels in conjunction with traditional approaches. In addition, the practitioners who took part in this study overwhelming believed it would be advantageous for recent graduates to be proficient in both new and traditional media production and possess knowledge of relevant theory. For educators, the development of a curriculum that reflects these expectations is no easy feat, although it may very well be an outcome given, as Buckingham's (2006) approach to understanding digital literacy and Jenkins' (2010) reflections on transmedia

pedagogy both suggest, that is within our collective grasp.

Further research

Limitations relating to sample size and uneven representation (location and industry sector) require further research to address these deficiencies. Further analysis of transmedia storytelling campaigns and current public relations pedagogy is recommended to determine whether a gap exists between teaching approaches and industry expectations of graduate expertise.

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