

NEW MEDIA AND TRANSMEDIA FOR DOCUMENTARY STORYTELLING:  
A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Science and Natural History Filmmaking

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY  
Bozeman, Montana

May 2011

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Federico Pardo

May 2011

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To the community of Campo de la Cruz (Colombia) which inspired me to tell their story and welcomed us with great energy. Thanks for sharing your experience.

Special thanks to Ian Van Coller for accepting being the chair of my thesis committee and for his valuable comments during the process. Also, thanks to Dennis Aig and Theo Lipfert for their time and convenient advice.

To my parents for their continuous and unconditional support throughout my education.

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## ABSTRACT

New media and transmedia are two phenomena that are currently changing the way in which media is produced, distributed and experienced. Although media scholars have proposed working definitions for these terms, their application for documentary storytelling is still scarce. Using the foundations offered by Henry Jenkins and Martin Lister and collaborators, I examine the consequences that new media and transmedia may have for documentary storytellers that are using them as production and distribution tools. This work is the result of a personal desire to explore new ways to document and tell stories while experimenting with different media formats and their interaction: photography, video, audio and the internet. New media and transmedia have resulted not only in new production technologies but also in a shift from passive media consumers to active media users. As a consequence, audiences now play a major role as interactive agents that are transforming the uses of media. By acknowledging the current state of how media is being produced, distributed and experienced, documentary storytellers may shed new lights when creating non-fiction media experiences.

## INTRODUCTION

### The Problem and Starting Point

The consumption of media across different platforms presents a relevant question that needs to be addressed in the context of how the latest media experiences are being produced, distributed and consumed. When watching a movie, reading a book, looking at photographs or browsing through social networks in the internet, what are audiences looking for and what are they getting out of the experience? Besides the entertainment value of consuming media across different platforms and having the opportunity to choose the contents that we want to consume, a very important aspect to think about is the shift on how media is being experienced in the recent years. As audiences we are welcomed to immerse ourselves in a world that has been crafted to stimulate our senses and please our storytelling desires. It is also a world that is composed of assorted media experiences that contribute to the overall process of consuming a story. Going to the movies is no longer an experience that is limited to the theatre, a billboard in the street or a TV ad. We now have a *new media* experience that complements the overall event of consuming a movie: a website devoted to the production, internet distributed trailers and behind the scenes featurettes, DVDs, video-games, downloadable soundtracks, fan pages across social networks, personal websites of the director the actors and the studio, and similar “added” features. In other words, nowadays, when a media experience is created, a whole world is created around it and we as audiences are welcomed to live it, enjoy it and exhaust the experience. Media scholar Henry Jenkins is not blind to this process and

has argued that “more and more, storytelling has become the art of world building” (Jenkins 116).

Right now, as a non-fiction media producer, I am interested in exploring the use and interaction of different media formats to document and tell a story. I am interested in creating worlds that rely on the intrinsic strengths of video, audio, photography and the web that allow the sharing of novel media experiences in which the audience can choose what to consume. All of this is in contrast to using one single media format (i.e., video or photos) to craft a story that allows one a one medium fits all approach. We can then argue that media producers face several challenges that are inherent to the storytelling process and to the constraints of the chosen production medium and the delivery platform.

Things are not necessarily becoming simpler and, with the continuous development of new media technologies and systems, there is a great diversity of production tools that can lead to innovative and sometimes “better” media experiences. A list that illustrates the dimensions and diversity of this network of tools would include: film stock, video tapes and memory cards; film cameras, photo cameras, HD cameras and 3D cameras; books, magazines, e-book readers, iPads and tablets; radio, television, movie theaters, museums, virtual reality, laptops, desktops and mobile phones; cable and satellite television, DVDs, video games, internet, Netflix, Flickr and YouTube. In short, we now have a cocktail of analogous and digital media, traditional and *new media*, old and new production devices, and choices of production and delivery platforms.

Assuming that media producers have the option to choose from all these tools to create and deliver their products, we can argue that the industry is constantly evolving as it produces innovative stories that start looking like *new media* experiences. These stories

are giving form to *new media* mostly through the internet, where they find markets and platforms where enthusiastic media consumers also have the opportunity to share their creations. During the last decade, the world of media has been changing from an industry that relied heavily on huge media conglomerates (monopolies) that determined and owned most content, to a smaller grassroots-driven market in which consumer-producers are the main creators of license-free content. Today, the immense offer of media technologies has helped democratize media production and its distribution, resulting in a “*participatory culture* [that] contrasts with older notions of passive media spectatorship” (Jenkins 3). Reviewing the extent of this network and the technical characteristics of the devices and technologies that are available is not the aim of this paper; nevertheless, for certain cases and examples, some technical matters will be addressed. The main objective, however, is to expand on some theoretical consequences that the decisions made by a producer may bring to documentary stories/worlds that are being crafted with the aid of these new technologies.

A particular scenario will be discussed: the use of *transmedia* for documentary storytelling relying on the internet as the main delivery platform. This, of course, will be discussed under the broader scope of *new media* and how this contemporary trend is changing how media is being produced, consumed and experienced (shifting from passive consumers -TV viewers- to active users -internet users). This last point brings to the table a decisive factor (behavior) on how audiences are nowadays relating to media contents and a key term for theorizing documentaries: **interactivity**. Bill Nichols used the term “interactive” to describe one of the documentary modes of representation in which the filmmaker intervenes or interacts in the production (Nichols 44); today, due to the

interactive role that audiences play on *new media* and *transmedia* documentaries, we can therefore acknowledge a new interpretation of Nichols' interactive mode of representation.

In addition to this, and taking into account new progress in media studies, the terms *new media* and *transmedia* will be defined in order to use them correctly and in an appropriate context. This recently introduced terminology is gaining ground fast and it can be found throughout new media literature and media communities on the internet. As it would be expected, younger generations may be more familiar with most of the terms that will be used in this paper while older internet users may have a correct abstract idea of their meanings. Regarding the current state of media evolution, it is thus important to find a common ground and strive for a standardization of the terms that will help expand the field of *new media* and *transmedia* for documentary storytelling.

#### Personal Statement on the Problem

Using audiovisual media to document and recreate someone else's reality poses several problems. Not only we are talking on behalf of somebody else, we are susceptible of falling into creative and technical decisions that may limit the documentation of a certain reality and its further representation. If one of our goals is to create objective or truthful non-fiction media it is thus important to understand that using certain media formats and systems will have different consequences during the production and distribution of the project. Accordingly, assuming that one single media format is enough to fully document a reality and a story may be a blind bet and a dangerous assumption if the goal is to create an in-depth media experience. Fortunately, the latest developments

and ideas regarding new media and transmedia are allowing producers to experiment with new ways of documenting and representing reality. This, in turn, has the potential of resulting in stronger storytelling through media experiences that audiences may find very attractive.

In January of 2011 I had the chance to work with the Colombian community of Campo de la Cruz whose members had to leave their town due to the dramatic floods that covered their houses with water for almost two months. As a documentary storyteller, I ran into a situation that, from my point of view, could not be documented with one single medium. Video, for example, would not allow me to include the life experiences of most of the people that I met and that I talked to during the production: some of them were camera shy, others just couldn't explain what they had gone through, and small meaningful details would have been dismissed. Photography, on the other hand, resulted in a common language of expression and for them having a tangible memory of their precarious situation seemed very relevant. It also allowed for a systematical documentation of the people and their daily routines. In addition to this, getting some background information on their lives helped to reconstruct the reality of the population that stayed, by the side of the road, waiting for the water to leave. The use of audio to record interviews and soundscapes that were particular to that specific moment of their lives may function as acoustic memories of those aspects that are hard to see, touch, smell, or simply remember. In sum, as a documentary storyteller I consider that in certain cases relying on new media and transmedia tools when creating stories, may result in a better understanding and communication of a given reality.

## THE EVOLUTION OF MEDIA: NEW MEDIA AND TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING

Thanks to the development of internet-based media technologies, the world of media consumption is evolving from passive audiences to active consumer-producers. A stereotypical TV consumer sits down on a couch and swaps channels until something pleases his or her interests. Most of what one can find on the vast offer of cable TV is created by big media conglomerates; the production budgets and resulting standards are hence unthinkable and unreachable for anyone outside of this production bubble. Lister and collaborators (32) described 20<sup>th</sup> century mass media to be

characterized by standardization of content, distribution and production process. These tendencies toward centralization and standardization in turn reflected and created the possibility for control and regulation of media systems, for professionalization of communicative and creative processes, for very clear distinctions between consumers and producers, and relatively easy protection of intellectual property.

We were/are thus passive consumers that will rarely have an active role on the TV or movie production industry and that can only hope to find something that fulfills our media interest while surfing hundreds of TV channels.

On the other hand, younger generations may be more familiar with a mouse and a keyboard to surf the web while looking for content and uploading their own media creations. This is the shift from audiences to users and from consumers to producers (Lister *et al* 31). YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Vimeo, Flickr, Blogging, Tumblr, MySpace, GrooveShark, Torrentz, Photoshelter, Digg, Pandora, StumbleUpon, Devour, and Netflix are just a few of the names that are common on a daily basis when talking

about internet based media production and distribution. One of the advantages that most of these web based services offer is that one is no longer just a consumer but also a content producer and/or distributor. Today, one doesn't need to sit in a couch, passively, waiting to find something amusing on TV; one can be an active member of an internet community that creates and distributes contents that suit one's interests exceptionally. What is even better (in terms of media democratization), one can direct, produce and distribute his/her own contents and be a contributor to these growing media communities. In Jenkins' words, you can create and share your own personal world (an overarching story that is developed using several texts, experiences, actors, collaborations, etc.) and participate in those created by others. The upraising of a *participatory culture* in which we are all participants and collaborators is fundamental in this new media trend and will help redefine the rules of media production and consumption (Jenkins 3).

### New Media

The term new media has been around for two decades already (Lister *et al* 10). It can be found often both in literature and throughout the web and, even though it is very hard to define concisely, older and younger generations have a general idea of its meaning. For most people new media may simply point to digital media found on the internet or similar recent media developments: pictures or videos on Facebook pages or blogs, a video game played on a TV or a computer, to a multimedia exhibition in a museum, to the interactive features of a DVD. In rough terms, for the general public, new media deals with some "new": technology that has enriched our ways of communicating and interacting in the last few years:

It is a term with broad cultural resonance rather than a narrow technician or specialist application. . . . A term that offers to recognize some big changes, technological, ideological and experiential, which actually underpin a range of different phenomena. It is, however, very general and abstract” (Lister *et al* 12).

We can then argue, then, that during this era of evolving technologies and their cultural uses, new media is a multi-dimensional change that is shaping cultures and generations at the same time that scholars and content producers are trying to define it.

Defining new media, however, isn't a simple task. An immediate consequence of having coined the term *new media* and using it is the historical -and technological- distinction that arises between older and newer media devices. This distinction is normally based purely on the technological aspects of the systems used to produce content. For example, we can mistakenly talk about analogue media (magnetic tapes, newspapers, paintings, film) versus digital media (compact discs, video tapes, memory cards, online data) and assert that the latter constitute what people are calling new media today. Although the use of analogue media has diminished considerably in the last decades and “newer” media content is mostly created with digital devices, it is important to understand that there is not an absolute break between the different systems used for media production. In fact, “many digital [content] are reworked and expanded versions of 'old' analogue media” (Lister *et al* 12). A straightforward example of this is the possibility to stream online (using Netflix) a compressed digital version of an Alfred Hitchcock movie that was shot on 35mm film. Seemingly, and perhaps more impressive, is Google's recent groundbreaking media experience “Google Art Project.”<sup>1</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> Google's Art Project consists of digital recreations of the significant art pieces found in museums throughout the world. In the Project's website you can “Explore museums from around the world,

erroneous understanding of new media results from generational changes and it will linger as long as media devices with new technologies are produced, put in the market and used creatively to produce content. Father and son, for example, may have completely different notions of what old media is; while the father may think that cell phones are part of the new media trend, his son may argue that a cell phone is obsolete -and old- if it does not take pictures, records video or allows him to browse the internet.

After understanding the misleading outcomes that time and new technology developments have brought to the definition of new media, it's then safe to return to the more abstract and plural definition of the term and elaborate from there. We can now assert that new media not only deals with technological developments but also with the artistic expressions that can be derived from them. New media refers to technological, ideological and experiential changes that are closely related to changes in the production, distribution and use of media. We are currently experiencing this process of change and it would be hard and ineffective to try and encapsulate new media as one specific phenomenon. However, dealing with such an abstract and broad definition isn't useful when the objective is to discuss the influences of new media for transmedia documentary storytelling. Lister and colleagues proposed a very helpful break down of the “global term. . . into some more manageable constituent parts” that will help us understand the extents to which new media is producing changes. (Lister *et al* 12). Listed herein are ideas that are taken from a close interpretation of Lister's break down in order to keep expanding on the definition of new media, and, at the same time, have the necessary theoretical concepts to elaborate on the field of new media for documentary storytelling.

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discover and view hundreds of artworks at incredible zoom levels, and even create and share your own collection of masterpieces.”

Lister and colleagues' adaptation will be done under the scope of a media producer and consumer that focuses primarily on the use of photography, video, audio, text, internet and their interactions to create transmedia experiences.

1. New textual experiences<sup>2</sup>: This idea relates to the creation of new and original media experiences (i.e. a sculpture, a series of photos, a movie, an installation, a computer game, etc.) that explore new and different genera, media formats, sensorial experiences, consumption patterns, interactive features, among others. What's key in these new texts is to offer the users a compelling and innovative experience which results from the interaction of these texts and the user. Computers and internet offer us this possibility and everyday new texts that explore unconventional genera and formats can be found.
2. New ways of representing the world: This concept is understood as the development of new media that are used to interpret and represent the world in a novel way. These new representations of the world can be based on traditional media creations (a photo, video footage, an animation) that have been modified to render new textual experiences (i.e., 3D and IMAX films, screen-based interactive multimedia, and virtual environments,). Jenkins talks about a recent media expression that supports the idea of finding new ways to represent the world: transmedia storytelling. Transmedia storytelling refers to a “story that unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole” (Jenkins 98). The use of these creative tools

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<sup>2</sup> Lister *et al* (430) define a text as “any artefact or product (a TV program, a video game), even an activity or performance (a dance), which has structure, specific qualities, meaning and which can be analysed and “read.”

should provide “new representational possibilities” and enhance the creation of new textual experiences.

3. New relationships between subjects (users and consumers) and media technologies: This idea makes sense of the changes that new media technologies are bringing to the experience of consuming media. Seemingly, it deals with the consequences and the meanings that changes bring to the users (i.e. touch screen phones, digital books, game consoles, portable HD cameras and movie players, photo geo-tagging, etc.). Jenkins develops the idea of media convergence which speaks about the process of how media is being consumed and used through the many technological devices that constantly feed us media content regardless of where we are. As a consequence, “we are already living in a convergent culture” (Jenkins 16) which implies a cultural shift on how media is operating in our lives on a daily basis. “Thanks to the proliferation of channels and the portability of new computing and telecommunication technologies, we are entering an era where media will be everywhere” (Jenkins 16).
4. New experiences of the relationship between embodiment, identity and community: this principle understands the changes affecting how we, personally and as a community, are experiencing time, space and place. These changes are closely related to the recent technological developments in the internet (social media, google maps, and virtual communications) and have a strong influence on how we see ourselves in the world and how we interact among ourselves. Today, worldwide interactions are mostly driven by internet channels that shorten distances, compress time and diversify connections. This allows for the

emergence of ever-growing virtual communities with specific identities and interests (fan communities, forums, social groups). The term *collective intelligence*, coined by French cybertheorist Pierre Lévy, refers to the process of collectively consuming media and consequently sharing a common knowledge about it. In Lévy's words:

The knowledge of a thinking community is no longer a shared knowledge for it is now impossible for a single human being, or even a group of people, to master all knowledge, all skills. It is fundamentally collective knowledge, impossible to gather together into a single creature (Lévy 214).

5. New conceptions of the biological body's relationship to technological media: this idea is related to the “distinctions between the human and the artificial, nature and technology, body and (media as) technological prostheses, the real and the virtual” (Lister *et al* 13). This idea pertains more to the study of human relationships with technology and media and how these developments have become an extension of our persona.
6. New patterns of organization and production: A concept that refers to the undergoing changes in media culture as a whole, “industry, economy, access, ownership, control and regulation”. This idea complements that of the shifts in media production and consumption. In contrast with the older trend of passive media consumers, audiences are becoming key players in the production and distribution of media at the same time that new forms of licensing content are increasing collaborations around the world. Big media conglomerates still control most of the content that is produced today but the internet has become the niche where anyone can distribute its own content and generate its own audience.

If new media is then an ongoing process that deals with the current evolution of media production, distribution and consumption, how can documentary storytellers benefit from it? Before addressing this question it's useful to define a scenario in which new media documentaries would be produced. Although some theatrical and feature documentaries have found complete distribution over the internet (mostly through Netflix and specific websites), it is vital to understand that these types of stories are not necessarily the ones that are benefiting the most from new media and transmedia during the storytelling process. In fact, and even though their presence in the web is growing more and more, it is still difficult to find good examples of documentaries that base their storytelling process on new media and transmedia. Some scenarios will be studied later but it's worth mentioning that, thus far, marketing campaigns for films are the ones more likely to have thorough new media outreach which aims to catch the audience's attention and convince them to watch or buy the film. Before expanding on the use of new media and transmedia for documentary storytelling, it is relevant to revise the meaning and consequences of transmedia as proposed by media scholar Henry Jenkins.

### Transmedia<sup>3</sup>

Transmedia storytelling is basically the process of telling a story using several texts across multiple forms of media<sup>4</sup>. The texts produced with each media do not need to be mixed into one final product; instead, they each bring distinctive contributions to the

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<sup>3</sup> Other authors refer to transmedia storytelling as multi-platform entertaining or cross-media (Jenkins 334)

<sup>4</sup> In Henry Jenkins' words: "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."

story, they exist as independent texts and it is up to the audiences to decide what to consume. According to Jenkins, the transmedia world of *The Matrix* “unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole” (Jenkins 97). *The Matrix*, for example, is composed of three movies, several comic books, two video games, a series of animated shorts, DVD special features and other media. Although hardcore *Matrix* fans may have consumed them all, the existence of all these texts to construct the world of *The Matrix*, and tell the complete Story, does not necessarily mean that if you don't consume them all you won't be part of the experience. In contrast, the idea of transmedia is that you can choose which texts you want to include in your experience and you can still be part of it. To avoid confusion, multimedia on the other hand, is the combination of several media formats into one single text. Multimedia should be understood as a distinct media format that can be used to document the world and tell a story. A multimedia text is then analogous to a photograph, a video or an animation and it can thus be used as a self-standing text that is part of a more complex transmedia experience.

Looking forward to expand on the theoretical grounding for transmedia, Henry Jenkins proposes seven concepts that are key when dealing with the creation and distribution of transmedia experiences<sup>5</sup>:

1. Spreadability vs. Drillability: These two expressions deal with how media can be consumed and shared. Spreadability refers to “the capacity of the public to engage actively in the circulation of media content through social networks and in the

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<sup>5</sup> Adapted from the following sources, <http://transmediaactivism.wordpress.com/> and <http://henryjenkins.org>

process expand its economic value and cultural worth”

(<http://www.henryjenkins.org/>). Drillability, on the other hand, is the capacity of media to engage consumers for longer periods of time as their contents are more demanding and complex. Spreadable media is easy to consume and to share “horizontally” through social networks while drillable media is consumed “vertically” for an in-depth experience and it's not as likely to be shared on social networks.

2. Continuity vs. Multiplicity: refers to the interconnectedness and coherence between the different texts that compose a transmedia experience. Continuity “seek[s] to construct a very strong sense of 'continuity' which contributes to our appreciation of the 'coherence' and 'plausibility' of the” worlds that are part of the overall story. In multiplicity we can run into the creation of parallel universes or alternate retellings that aren't necessarily the exact same as the original one text.
3. Immersion vs. Extractability: these terms are useful to understand the space in which the transmedia experience takes place and thus determining the type of experience. “In immersion. . . . The consumer enters into the world of the story, while in extractability, the fan takes aspects of the story away with them as resources they deploy in the spaces of their everyday life”  
(<http://www.henryjenkins.org/>). Museum exhibits, video games, internet forums can be considered immersive experiences while action figures, costumes and soundtracks would be extractive.
4. Worldbuilding: This idea relates to the creation of a large world where the Story takes place. In a documentary, for example, a world may consist of the movie

released theatrically, a DVD with special features, a website with interviews with the producers, photo galleries relating to the story, links to other sources on the topic, a blog with updates on the project, a CD with the soundtrack, a book on the making of, etc. In addition to this, the world may be complemented by extensions that does not necessarily play a major role on the central narrative but that may enhance the experience of fans and communities surrounding the world. Action figures, clothing, fan communities in social networks, could be an example of these extensions. It's important to keep in mind that most of the world-building that has been done for documentary storytelling is related to marketing strategies rather than the storytelling process itself.

5. Seriality: closely related to how the plot is dispersed throughout the different media. “A serial. . . . creates meaningful and compelling story chunks and then disperses the full story across multiple [segments and] installments” (<http://www.henryjenkins.org/>). What's important to understand is that in transmedia the plot is dispersed across different media platforms and audiences are the ones in charge for gathering the dispersed chunks of the story.
6. Subjectivity: This term deals with the “multiple subjectivities” that converge in a transmedia story. These diverse points of view and new perspectives on a given story open unexplored dimensions of the created world and may push the “audience's desire to see through more than one set of eyes” (<http://www.henryjenkins.org/>). However, to attain more objective stories, it's vital for the audience to be aware who is the author of a particular extension and for whom it's being created.

7. Performance: This idea refers to an eventual participation of a new collaborator or fan communities in the creation of the transmedia story. Internet has had a big impact on opening spaces for those who want to take part of a media experience by creating, distributing and/or modifying content related to the story. These performances however, are normally linked to the central story but are not necessarily blessed or authorized by the director. One of the previously discussed advantages of new media is that it not only offers the tools and space to create and distribute amateur productions, it also offers the ability to communicate and collaborate with others during the process. Up to date, important media corporations are still trying to figure out the best way to handle fan communities and the legal issues that arise when they infringe copyright laws.

These working concepts offer a scope to what media scholars have developed so far as a theoretical background of transmedia. They are not meant to be interpreted as distinct and tight categories but rather to offer an interesting starting point to expand on the uses and consequences of transmedia storytelling. New media and transmedia are, then, two contemporary media trends and working tools that will keep evolving while developing new ways to represent the world and create new media experiences to tell stories. One of the fields that has received little attention is the impact of new media and transmedia is documentary storytelling.

## NEW MEDIA AND TRANSMEDIA FOR DOCUMENTARY STORYTELLING

After reaching common ground on working definitions for new media and transmedia, it is easier to review the application of these concepts for documentary storytelling. Rather than approaching a specific example that pretends to include everything, a few production scenarios (real or hypothetical) will be presented depending on the working argument(s). This approach will allow for an easier development of the discussed ideas and will aim at different potential uses of new media and transmedia. What will be discussed here does not intend to be extensive analyses of all the possible applications and consequences of dealing with these tools but rather a revealing study of certain aspects of it. There are a few particular media expressions of special interest that may be the most extensively used in relation to producing and consuming media throughout the world wide web<sup>6</sup>. These are photography, video, written texts, audio (music) and the interaction between of all of these (multimedia creations). My focus is thus try to explore the consequences of using new media and transmedia to produce content for documentary storytelling. Most of what will be discussed arises from personal experience as an emerging media producer who has found in new media and transmedia ideal tools to create and distribute content.

To start off, several arguments will be offered about why using new media and transmedia is relevant for documentary storytelling. Clearly, and not surprisingly, the

<sup>6</sup> In July of 2006, six months after Youtube had been officially launched, the site has more than 100 million views a day and 65,000 new videos are uploaded daily. A few years later, in October of 2009, Youtube reached more that 1 billion views per day and by March of 2010, 24 hours of video were uploaded hourly to YouTube.com.

Searching for 'dog' pictures on Flickr results in almost 9 million tagged pictures; 'wedding' results in more than 23 million; 'travel,' 14 million; 'pineapples,' 160 thousand. And these are only images tagged in english.

implementation of these new tools imply important questions as well as significant pros and cons related to understanding content.

### What Could Be Considered a Transmedia Documentary?

Because new media and transmedia are still in their earliest stages, both as a field of study and in practice, it is difficult to recognize one quintessential documentary work that could be considered the first one to use these tools to create a world and tell a story. This world, accordingly, constitutes the overarching story and it includes all the different texts and expressions that are part of the transmedia media experience. I would like, however, to cite the case of Al Gore's transmedia world around *An Inconvenient Truth* since it is a few years old and it may be a well known case to the general public. The story of the award winning documentary directed by Davis Guggenheim can be traced back to a 1992 book called *Earth in the Balance* also published by Gore. In 2000, after his defeat in the presidential elections, Gore started touring the United States and the world giving his famous global warming slide show that resulted in the production of a feature documentary, the distribution of a TED Talks virtual slideshow, the publication of a book and the launching of a few websites<sup>7</sup>. The sum of all these texts is what could be considered the transmedia world created for *An Inconvenient Truth*. Yet, one issue that is worth acknowledging is the similarity in content across the different texts and the effects that this may have had on the audience's thirst to consume the whole story. What is important, though, is the use of several synchronized media platforms (a book, a movie, a viral slideshow) to communicate the message and spread the word thoroughly. *An*

<sup>7</sup> "TED is a nonprofit devoted to Ideas Worth Spreading" Through their website they distribute the talks held at their annual conference.

*Inconvenient Truth's* initiative may be regarded as one of the first efforts of what today is called transmedia activism.<sup>8</sup> We can safely assert that Al Gore's campaign, to promote global warming awareness, was an environmental story told through different and complementing media experiences. A transmedia campaign.

A more recent transmedia effort can be followed in the latest BBC and Discovery epic production, *Human Planet*. Besides the main 8 episodes that make the series, there is an interesting transmedia experience devoted to the people who want to follow the production. Not surprisingly, a specific website is the place where the fan community of the series can watch short clips of the making of the series, chat with the producers, navigate through photo galleries, read interviews from cinematographers and music composers and follow the production blog.<sup>9</sup> In short, a new media and transmedia marketing campaign on steroids! Although these media expressions are vital for the ongoing evolution of the new media and transmedia, they have more to do with the marketing than with the storytelling process. It could be argued, however, that they are an intentional and transmedia documentary of the production of this series.

Despite the fact that more examples like the above mentioned ones could be discussed and studied under the definitions of new media and transmedia proposed, I would like to argue that a straightforward approach to transmedia documentary storytelling is yet to be found. One of the reasons for this is that transmedia is still in its early stages and it has not permeated the different narrative genera across the different

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<sup>8</sup> Some initiatives of transmedia activism can be found in the following websites:

<http://resistnetwork.com/>

<http://www.eyeofthestorm.tv/>

<http://www.avaaz.org/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/nature/humanplanetexplorer/>

media formats. Additionally, it is safe to assume that few producers will put their money in transmedia until the first true non-fiction experience becomes successful and its production details are shared in the community.

### How is Objectivity Affected in Transmedia Documentary Storytelling?

Transmedia is the art of world building using distinct media systems (formats) that allow the representation of the world in different ways. If we take a look at non-fiction media production, the National Film Board of Canada may be the responsible for some of the more complex and advanced web based transmedia experiences, yet I'd like to explore a more basic approach to what could be considered a transmedia experience<sup>10</sup>. A current example is the coverage that can be found on the internet about Japan's tsunami on Fukushima's coast. A simple web search results in photo galleries, footage from citizen, security and aerial video cameras, satellite imagery, multimedia presentations, twitter threads, newspaper stories, animations, scientific texts, etc. Hundreds of media were created to cover this catastrophe and the sum of all these parts can be seen as a very large but unarticulated new media and transmedia documentary. The coverage exists and it is open and up "for grabs" so anyone internet user can decide what to consume and what to avoid. If you like reading better than listening to a journalist you can do it and it is simple. You even have the option of choosing between different written formats: online newspapers and/or magazines, scholarly publications, twitter, wikipedia, personal blogs, etc. One of the issues nonetheless, is that this apparent transmedia documentary on

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.nfb.ca/>  
<http://waterlife.nfb.ca/>  
<http://highrise.nfb.ca/>  
<http://fromzero.tv/>

Japan's earthquake is, for the most part, a series of disarticulated texts that only when understood together as a whole could be considered one story, one world, one transmedia text. One question that arises is whether people are understanding these unarticulated and separate transmedia stories as a whole. The other possibility, is that producers need to work more to better construct their *transmedia* experiences. Arguably, Jenkins' working definition for transmedia, offers a sense of continuity. The seriality of transmedia pieces is dispersed throughout the web, their creation requires performances from diverse content creators and they are normally consumed through immersion. This point opens up the use of the term transmedia to interpret journalistic texts that are originated independently with a common story in mind.

In addition to this and with regards to the “subjectivity” (*sensu* Jenkins) of the overall story, it can be argued that the collective intelligence contained in all the media published on Fukushima offers an objective and thorough transmedia documentary. This objectivity, however, not only depends on the quality of the content published but also depends heavily on the consumer's media consumption habits and strengths. Jenkins draws a very interesting analogy between early hunter-gatherer societies and the consumption of media texts on the internet. Whether it is images, videos, interviews or texts, media consumers have the tendency to go to the same distribution websites where they normally find what they are looking for, or, more recently, consume and distribute content through their social networks accounts. We enjoy surfing the web, hunting and gathering content that pleases our aesthetic and informative interests and, most importantly, that fulfills our needs for creating our own new media and transmedia documentaries, our own stories, our own truths, our own worlds. In sum, the objectivity

of a transmedia story found across the internet no longer depends only on the storyteller but also on the consumption habits and skills of the audience.

Moreover, a very important point can be made regarding the use of social networks when looking for media content to gather information about a specific event (e.g. Japan's Tsunami), and the objectivity that the resulting disarticulated new media documentary may imply. In Jenkins terms we would be referring to the consequences of “spreadability.” Social networks offer an outstanding view to other people's web life and interests; we peek and consume their media interests and they can consume ours. The trend to express these personal interests is becoming more and more media driven to the point that “an average Facebook user creates 90 pieces of content each month and more than 30 billion pieces of content (web links, news stories, blog posts, notes, photo albums, etc.) are shared on Facebook each month” (<https://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>). Even if just half of that 30 billion pieces are media, the numbers are still high in terms of uploaded texts that other people can consume. Facebook pages are constructed as a cultural, professional and political collage of what we like and want to “share” with others. Moreover, everybody's situated knowledge (each person's background) is unconsciously contained in his or her own web outreach.<sup>11</sup> The sources of the media shared in this never ending collage may be personally or externally produced, yet, what is relevant, is the decision of sharing, posting, “liking,” twitting, re-twitting, “digging” or linking certain contents. We all now have a voice and our media consumption habit shifted from passive-sit-down-viewers to active-clicking-users. What's important,

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<sup>11</sup> Term coined by Donna Haraway's in her article "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspectives". The argument suggests that any knowledge is specific to a particular situation and personal background (cultural, political, professional), and that in order to achieve greater objectivity it is important to be aware of each own's situated knowledge.

however, is that as media consumers we understand that situated knowledge driven content abounds in the internet. This, in turn, will lead to more objective transmedia stories.

## USING PHOTOGRAPHY, VIDEO AND THE WEB FOR TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING

Revisiting the idea of why transmedia may be useful for documentary storytelling, we cannot leave aside the inherent strengths and potential uses that specific media may bring to the story. Each medium has specific aesthetic qualities that, when used creatively and “properly,” may enhance the overall finished product. We can thus talk about media specificity and its consequences. An interesting scenario results from comparing photography and video as working tools to document a story and create a visual text. They can both be used creatively in many different ways and it would be very hard to review what are the inherent qualities of each form, yet the discussion of some fundamental aspects will bring important ideas when producing content for transmedia projects. Let us remember that transmedia storytelling doesn't mean that all the produced media will end up meshed up together in a single piece. This would be multimedia. In transmedia, as stated earlier, each medium should be used independently and the text can be consumed as a single piece or as part of a larger story.<sup>12</sup>

### Media as Indexical Items

As described by Geoffrey Batchen (61), “photographs are designated indexical signs, images produced as a consequence of being directly affected by the objects to which they refer. . . . On this basis, photographs are able to parade themselves as the world's own chemical fingerprints, nature's poignant rendition of herself as memento

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<sup>12</sup> As mentioned earlier, Henry Jenkins uses the world created for *The Matrix* by the Wachowski brothers as an example of transmedia storytelling.

mori.” This particular characteristic of photographs is relevant because photographs are an inventory of the world. A photographer's job is to index the world through still images. Photographs help us document and single out specific scenes. Subjects that appear in photographs become detached from the surrounding world and live encapsulated in their own space -the photograph. A series of photographs can be regarded as a collection of faces, cars, wildlife, architecture, landscapes, moments, that were singled out and then put together as a intentional catalog. This use of photography stands out from that of video footage and has decisive consequences on the production of a transmedia project.

Video footage, on the other hand, as a series of still images that are played back at a certain frequency, results in a continuum of elements that re-create life and don't feel as detached from the world. In other words, a video clip isn't a frozen representation of the world but a synchronized display of elements that can choreographed together in a determined space and time frame. In addition to this, the elements contained in a video clip can be used to develop a story arc that, in a single photograph, may be more difficult to obtain. If we then add audio to a determined video text, we now have two different media systems working together to document and reproduce a story, and thus a more elaborate representation of reality. By no means should it be assumed that these distinct characteristics of video make it a better medium for a storyteller, they can either strengthen certain aspects of a non-fiction story or be counterproductive.

Choosing the characters and interviewees to include in a documentary film is a good practical example to better understand this point. A film director normally faces the tough decision of who should be interviewed, who should be a key character in the story, who should be left aside, and, overall, what should be included and what should not.

Taking this idea a step further, one could argue that only a certain amount of characters can make it into any given documentary. Sometimes this number can be high (10-15) but then the problem of remembering who is who depends on the audience's attention.

Photography, on the other hand, allows a media producer to do large series of portraits, take hundreds or thousands of pictures and then narrow them down to whatever the project goals are and the distribution format is. Arguably, and budget being a crucial factor, photography allows for meticulous and extensive visual documentation of certain subject matters which may build up a more inclusive and perhaps objective world.

Acknowledging this may be useful when planning a transmedia story. The examples mentioned below, on the indexical uses of video and photography, shed new lights on this matter at the same time that they highlight the advantages of new media tools for documentary storytelling.<sup>13</sup>

- ⤴ The exhibition “6 billion Others” created by Yann Arthus Bertrand, which witnesses the extent of new media when creating an experience based on 5,600 interviews done in 78 countries.
- ⤴ The USC Shoah Foundation Institute and Steven Spielberg's archival project of nearly 52,000 video testimonies of Holocaust survivors and witnesses, to make them available on the web for the public.

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.6milliardsdautres.org>  
<http://onevoiceatatime.org/>  
[http://www.newyorker.com/online/multimedia/2009/12/07/091207\\_audioslideshow\\_platon](http://www.newyorker.com/online/multimedia/2009/12/07/091207_audioslideshow_platon)  
<http://theelectionproject.co.uk/>  
<http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/>

- ⤴ *Platon's* photography project “Portraits of Power” in which he photographed 49 world leaders (presidents, prime ministers, dictators) during a United Nations summit and accompanied each photo with a personal commentary.
- ⤴ “The Election Project” created by UK photographer Simon Roberts to document the 2010 British elections through his lens and the photos of people from all over the country.
- ⤴ The New York Times photo-journalism blog “Lens”, and the visual stories told therein.

One of the most relevant aspects that we could analyze from these projects are the production budgets, the amount of people and time devoted to the each production, the distribution channels, the uses of the information contained therein, and the project's resilience in time (understood as how many times it may be used in the future). One common denominator, however, is the use of new media technologies for the production and distribution of these stories: they all have specific websites that act as extensions that complement the story while contributing to the consumer's overall experience. Because of this it would be futile to attempt encapsulating any of these texts as media expressions that rely on a single and distinct medium format. They are all part of the new media change.

If new media empowers consumers to produce and distribute their own content without requiring the budgetary muscle of big media conglomerates, we could then argue that photography is a great medium for indexing purposes in a transmedia experience. Video, on the other hand, is very useful to develop story arcs and engage the consumer in

a world in which audiovisual elements benefit from continuity and developing in a specific time frame.

### Of Formats, Consumption Habits and Interactivity

Image formats and aspect ratios are two of the biggest issues that arises when dealing with media systems that evolved independently and that eventually found a common distribution screen: a computer or a TV, both of which are rectangular. Any photographer who has produced a considerable amount of vertically oriented photos, and who has displayed them on a website, understands the constraints of resizing the images to around 800 pixels tall; otherwise the photos do not fit vertically in a standard browser because it is likely that they will be cropped by the height of the browser's window. Also, trying to use vertically oriented photographs on a video or a multimedia presentation can be considered an editing nightmare and results in the possible butchering of the images. In other words, we live in a horizontal world that was born with the 4:3 aspect ratio and now is dominated by 16:9 screens or media players. Photography, contrastingly, can be used horizontally or vertically. When will manufacturers develop square TVs or computer monitors that give the same importance to horizontally and vertically produced media? When will a media-specific social network like YouTube or Flickr, install media players that don't emphasize any aspect ratio in particular? For example, I imagine a media player that resembles a black square in which any aspect ratio media will play without any height or length constraints. This would mean looking back into 4:3 monitors that benefited, to an extent, any aspect ratio. Some people may argue that the aspect ratio and vertical-horizontal orientation of a media production can be used creatively to emphasize

on certain aesthetic values of the experience. While this is true, the important point that needs to be addressed is the physical constraints that screens and media players are presupposing to producers and consumers today. As transmedia becomes popular among content creators, the issue of aspect ratios will become more and more relevant and the solution may be in the hands of those who design media platforms (laptops, desktops, TVs, tablets).

As stated earlier, consumer generated content has found several distribution niches on the internet. This development has resulted in communities of amateur media producers that are still keen consumers of media who are constantly looking for new experiences to fulfill their interests. While some may prefer skimming through galleries of photographs and focus only on those that really attract their attention, others may go directly to video based stories, written texts or what some websites call multimedia texts. The point is that the growing new media trend suggests that media producers should be creating multi-format content that suits all interests and consumption habits. For transmedia storytellers this is a pivotal point in time because they have been granted media thirsty audiences that act as media hunter-gatherers-sharers. Consumers who are actively searching for the different pieces of a story and sharing them through their web outreach, become key players in the process of interactive transmedia storytelling. Finally, the interactive characteristic of new media and transmedia experiences brings us to the last point of this paper.

As documentary producers we cannot ignore Bill Nichols' use of the term “interactive” to discuss one of the modes to represent reality in non-fiction films. Nichols used to describe the documentary films in which the filmmaker intervenes or interacts

during the production. A well-known example is Michael Moore's films in which he plays an active role on the screen as the main storyteller and pivotal character. We can argue that in new media and transmedia experiences the most relevant interactive role is now played by the consumers as they hunt, gather and share the contents that they want. A shift in media culture, production and consumption has opened a new meaning for Nichols' interactive documentary mode of representation and will slowly keep transforming the world of non-fiction storytelling as long as the new media processes are in play.

## CONCLUSION

As documentary storytellers, we shouldn't be blind to the deep technological, ideological and experiential transformations that new media is bringing to the way that media is produced and consumed today. We cannot ignore the growing trend of using transmedia storytelling as a production tool. As documentary storytellers we now have in our hands very dynamic cultural and technological tools that can strengthen the non-fiction worlds that we are creating for others to consume and to experience through interaction. Opening our eyes and minds to these important shifts in the media industry will also allow for a more conscious approach when crafting a story, that in turn, may result in a more objective media experience. Even though transmedia is a young media expression, it deserves major attention because it is already happening unconsciously among avid media consumers who surf the internet gathering the media texts that fulfill their storytelling needs. As world creators, storytellers and crafters of media experiences, we have the tools is in our hands to push the unconscious expressions of new media and transmedia and use them purposefully in our upcoming projects.

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