EDULEARN 20

12TH **INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON EDUCATION AND NEW LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES**

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

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TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING RESEARCH PARADIGMS AND PRACTICES IN LATIN AMERICA AND SPAIN: AN INTERVIEW WITH ACADEMIC DIRECTORS AND EXPERTS

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Abstract

The presence and praxis of transmedia storytelling has been through different paths according to its genres, results or target audiences. However, there are still scarce sources that have established comparatives analysis about tendencies of this phenomenon based in its geographical origin. Narrowly linked to digital technologies and within the framework of the participatory digital ecosystem, the phenomenon is seen as a set of knowledge, narratives and practices that are subjected of being transferable and apprehensive. The present study contributes to the comprehension of the phenomenon of transmedia storytelling establishing a comparative approach among the theory and the practice exerted from both sides of the Atlantic, its transfer systems of techniques, narratives and knowledge viewed from higher education. For this purpose, we have conducted interviews with academic directors and experts of communication programs of prestigious education institutions in Latin America and Spain. The results present, therefore, a mapping of the presence of transmedia storytelling in higher education at a conceptual and practical level, analyzing human and material resources that are considered in these programs and spaces, and that have a decisive effect on the production of these future professionals.

Keywords: transmedia, transmedia literacy, transmedia skills, higher education, Latin America, Spain.

1 INTRODUCTION

Media literacy is a topic that has been approached since the beginning of the new millennium. However, it has been only until the decade of 2010 that it was included in the contribution of transmedia storytelling, positioned in the academic world on the basis of Henry Jenkins' studies since 2004, thus threatening the concept of transmedia literacy in 2009.

After having established the concept of transmedia, widened its semantic field in terms of defining features and verified the importance of transmedia in the multiliteracy of its users, [1] the analysis and experiments of how transmedia affects classes have increased throughout the research community [2]; especially in English and Spanish, even leading research projects [3], [4]. These studies have revealed the skills of the users, especially of the youngest ones, when interacting with transmedia storytelling: Jenkins' team suggests twelve specific skills, structured in the so-called transmedia navigation within the framework of media convergence and participatory culture. These findings have led to a potential progressive evaluation of this new methodology and new way of telling a story in the 21st century for secondary education —there is plenty of literature and experiments in this field—, and higher education.

Universities will be the object of study for this research. The field research on this specific object of study dates from the beginning of this decade in Spain [5] and it has been increasing especially on this side of the Atlantic. In order to best present our results, it is necessary to rigorously define the semantic field of this widespread term assumed by everyone. Likewise, we find it also very necessary to update the meaning of transmedia literacy [6], [7] or transliteracy [5], [8]. First of all, it is necessary to mention what we understand by transmedia storytelling. For this, we have the advantage of having performed a previous work on defining that explored a wide framework of narratives [9], which collects and considers the main contributions to its multiple dimensions. Furthermore, we have defined this concept, applying it to the case of study of the transmedia universe of Plot 28 [10]. Our experience is based on the design, development, and diffusion of the aforementioned transmedia universe, produced in 2013, and pioneer in the Spanish language. Additionally, we have vast experience in the study of academic contexts [11], as well as in comparative research, emphasizing new narratives and

cybermedia [12]. All of that has provided us with the important keys to understand the reception mechanisms of the 21st century.

The university environment is characterized for being the origin and the beginning of multiple industry transformation. Higher education institutions tend to be the topic of discussion in terms of formulating new theories and tendencies that directly affect it, especially, in the communication field. As a result, there is an unstable and dynamic field [13], which is also mediated by typical negotiation strategies of the field [14]. This situation is closely linked to the need for permanent updating of professors, to the various ways of making it possible and, at the same time, to the fact of dealing with the obsolescent quality of knowledge [15].

The present study is conducted in higher education institutions of Latin American, Spain, and Portugal (for this, we considered the previous work of Grandío-Pérez (2016) [5] at the present time. This study looks for answers from the decision-makers in the academic field, especially from those in charge of the communication programs, in undergraduate and postgraduate studies for the aforementioned geographical areas. From a methodology perspective, the aim of this study is to go further other studies focused on the use of platforms [16], technologies, or the ones approaching only quantitative aspects. The present research study focuses on the content, context —both aspects were addressed by Grandío-Pérez (2016) [5]—, and creative and participatory aspects concerning students as well as teachers and the current challenges of the transmedia storytelling. The aim of this study is to contribute to the understanding of the nature of teaching at a theoretical and practical level of transmedia as a communication phenomenon and as a media literacy instrument, since nowadays it is part of the social and work reality linked to career instability [17]. Consequently, professors respond to the imperative need for an effective and efficient repertoire of newly acquired skills aimed at satisfying changing scenarios and new learning paradigms, and at having a continuously updated competency profile [18]. Therefore, the aim of the following pages is to map the presence of transmedia storytelling in higher education at a conceptual and practical level, analyzing human and materials resources considered in these environments, which definitely have a decisive effect on the production of these future professionals.

2 METHODOLOGY

The present non-experimental study, which has a descriptive scope, was conceived from a qualitative approach with the application of structured interviews. A structured questionnaire was made by the authors of the present study in order to make data collection operative. This questionnaire had five thematic blocks related to the conceptual definition of transmedia, infrastructure and available resources, specific professors training, and transfer mechanisms for students and general society. In order to validate the quality of the instrument, the first drafts were sent to two expert researchers in transmedia in February 2020. They were in charge of giving their opinion on the quality of the questions. After implementing the feedback of the experts, with the database of the thematic group 19 Comunicación digital, redes y procesos, from the Latin American Association of Communication Researchers (ALAIC), we made a list of 24 Ibero-American experts on this topic. After that, six more experts from Spain and Portugal were added to the list. The experts, selected in a judgmental sampling (non-probability sampling), were chosen according to the following criteria: a) Regional diversity b) Proven previous experience in research or academic products or academic experts in transmedia narrative or having a directive role in a university. To contact the experts, we sent a standard email in several opportunities in March 2020. Due to the COVID-19 global crisis, we found it difficult to contact them. Finally, we could have been able to interview 12 Ibero-American academic experts or directors. They come from Argentina (n=2), Colombia (n=2), Ecuador (n=1), Spain (n=2), Mexico (n=1), Peru (n=2) and Portugal (n=2): Soledad Arréguez Manozzo (Universidad Católica Argentina), Tomás Ricardo Atarama Rojas (Universidad de Piura), Úrsula Freundt-Thurne (Universidad Peruana de Ciencias Aplicadas), Jorge Alberto Hidalgo Toledo (Universidad Anáhuac), Mirian Nogueira Tavares (Universidad del Algarve), Félix Ortega (Universidad de Salamanca), Simón Peña (Universidad del País Vasco), Bianca Raciope (Universidad Nacional de La Plata), Pedro Rodrigues (Universidade do Minho), Sandra Ruiz (Universidad Santo Tomás), Juan Pablo Trámpuz (Universidad Laica Eloy Alfaro de Manabí), María Isabel Villa (Universidad EAFIT). In order to facilitate the interviews' execution, they were conducted by telephone or sent by e-mail. In general, there were more male (n=7) than female respondents (n=5). The average age of the respondents was 44 years old, and the average years of work experience was 15.1. Since some of the answers have university confidential elements, we have changed the names of some of the respondents for their

country codes (AR, CO, EC, ES, MEX, PER, and POR) and for a number from 1 to 12 when entering their opinions.

3   RESULTS

3.1   Practical and conceptual mapping

All respondents recognized the difference between the two main online narratives: transmedia and crossmedia. According to the answers, the first one is related to a type of narrative, where several platforms expand a story. In this case, platforms work independently or interdependently. Therefore, they create different stories depending on the levels of the users' appropriation: "Transmedia is more related to the universe of meaning than to the use of a platform" (ME4). For crossmedia, platforms and languages are used to create a unique story, and users' appropriation is not essential: "Crossmedia implies a convergence of different media, which aggregates content and expands it" (POR5). In consequence, between the two of them, there is a distinctive conceptualization: the first one – transmedia– has been conceived to circulate in cyberspace and acquire a new meaning with other users' participation. The second –crossmedia– is linked to unique stories created to intensify the users' experience.

Most of the respondents (n=10) agree on the fact that the articulation of the transmedia narrative as a participatory strategy is an important topic. Said otherwise, a narrative conceived from the active intervention of the users by contributing with new content and contribution. In some cases, such contributions cannot be planned, and they happen spontaneously according to the impact or scope of the original content. According to the answers, participation often encounters certain problems such as the asymmetry between the original producers of the idea and the collective intelligence (in other words, the users who participate in the development of the story), or the copyright, which can create tension to the appropriation of the audience:

"<…> transmedia strategy puts in evidence the possibility of collaborative creation. We must explain that in this part concerning collaborative creation, the power relationships between producers and users are asymmetric, especially when important corporations promote transmedia strategies. I mention this to stop romanticizing the idea of collaborative creation" (AR8).

Only two respondents confirmed that participation is not an essential element, that is, participation based on the expansion of the content. Whereas, the interaction becomes essential since it helps to expand the narrative diffusion: "Not necessarily [participation], virality must exist" (ES6).

3.1.1   Human and material resources

The term transmedia appeared in the university curricula or in the different communication and journalism programs during the last five years (between 2015 and 2020) for half of the respondents (n=6) academic contexts. The other main tendency linked to conceptual updating occurred between 2010 and 2014 (n=5). And only one respondent confirmed that his university had implemented this narrative perspective between 2009 and 2015. Perhaps one of the main inconveniences detected was the lack of specific research, within most of the study programs related to transmedia narrative. In that sense, there are many indicators. Most of the respondents (n=9) confirmed that research and project groups related to reflection and deep thinking on this area do exist. However, when asking them about the type of bibliography they use for academic purposes to define or present transmedia, almost all of the reference authors were the canonical-international ones such as Henry Jenkins or Piérre Lévy mainly. The most mentioned Latin-American authors were Carlos Scolari and Omar Rincón. Only one of the respondents gave us specific examples of academic research conducted in the university he works for (ES7).

The aforementioned inconvenience —a possible poor scientific production from the academic environment of the respondents— is related to the professors' experience concerning the conceptualization, development and/or project management of transmedia. Only one of the twelve respondents openly admitted that professors in his academic unit do not have the proper training (EC11). Likewise, one respondent mentioned that all professors of his program are specialist in this field (COL12). In the other cases, the answers indicate that there are few specialist professors in charge of teaching courses related to transmedia, as well as of leading projects on this matter. Even though, scientific production is poor in this field, all the experts except for one mentioned several transmedia projects undertaken within their universities, undertaken in class or bigger projects, using

institution or external funding. Most of the respondents (n=7) accepted that the universities or programs where they perform their teaching activities, do not benefit the updating of knowledge by means of courses, workshops or seminars concerning transmedia topics. For them, the professors' training depends basically on their registration to postgraduate programs such as a master or doctorate program. Less than half of the respondents (n=5) assured that their universities have had facilitated updating courses for professors.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The transmedia narrative conceptualization seems to be established within the academic community consulted. The respondents identify well the general characteristics concerning crossmedia narrative, recognizing the independence or interdependence level of the product uniqueness, as the main difference. Discrepancies about the levels of users' participation arise among them though. Even if for most of the respondents, the challenge concerning transmedia is the user incentive —in most of the cases it is spontaneous— of configuring and expanding self and interdependent stories upon the original plot. The truth is that two experts indicated that participation is not essential. That would make sense especially for those transmedia products designed by corporations —film releases—, which are in charge of the story promotion.

In half of the academic environment where the consulted respondents perform their teaching activities, transmedia was a new field, recently implemented, and established more as a referent for research than an established practice. For that reason, the referential academic production was focused on studies, and most of them exceeded a decade of being published, and they had not the same cultural and geographic context of the respondents, or they do not suggest any solution to the challenges the Latin-American academics were facing, in terms of technology and economic gaps. In that sense, transmedia is perceived more as an individual or small group of professors' impulses, than as an institutional initiative concerning the knowledge updating of their professors' staff.

We consider that, the aforementioned conclusions must be cautiously taken into consideration because of the main limitation of the present study: we have conducted 12 interviews. As a consequence, the present study has a qualitative approach. As a future research field, it would be interesting to approach the examination of this phenomenon from the perspective of the cultures of reception, that is, from the perspective of populations that, like young communities, are active actors of the transmedial development.

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