

Chapter 6

Designing Transmedia Journalism Projects

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the design and execution of transmedia journalism projects to inform professional production and academic experimentation. It draws on the author's current project to illustrate real-world production planning. The chapter opens with a discussion of how design thinking and audience targeting apply to this task and contribute to project success. The chapter then elaborates the flow of decisions required for a thorough transmedia plan and finally presents the Refuge project as a design example. This pilot transmedia story network focuses on the single issue of refugees: those who migrate by force, either to escape suffering and deprivation or to build new, more hopeful lives elsewhere. It is the first in a networked series of similar projects that will explore the issues that polarize the electorate in the American West, from economic stratification to religious identity, environment, and gun ownership rights.

INTRODUCTION

A transmedia project in any other industry must first build a storyworld, a superbly imagined, detailed space and culture the characters inhabit and in which the public may immerse, as described by Frank Rose (2011) and by others (Jenkins, 2006, 2009; Ryan, 2006, 2014). Journalism, however, works within the real universe (often as it is in the process of falling apart). For the transmedia journalism project creator or analyst, this refocuses the question: How does a transmedia journalist build a project that does not fall apart? For a transmedia story to function most effectively it should leave much less to chance than that to which journalists are accustomed. Thoughtful, comprehensive design is imperative.

Deep and pre-planned design is a relative rarity in journalism. The task of covering an ever-changing world and the role of check and balance on governmental and social structures leaves journalists reacting to news as it emerges. Other media industries, however, must design the production and delivery of all content they produce. In journalism, rarely enough thought is given to how that work may better reach critical publics across a complex mediascape—there just is not enough time in the news cycle. Though

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not all stories should be given a transmedia structure, and though the news business will always be a heavily reactive one, journalism can certainly benefit from applying transmedia storytelling techniques to longer-term, investigative and socially concerned work.

This chapter will explore the broad idea of *design thinking* as well as audience targeting that is applicable to the design and execution of transmedia journalism projects, and it will draw from the author's own current project to inform academic experimentation and professional production. As discussed in the growing body of literature (Gambarato & Tárca, 2017; Moloney, 2011, 2015; Ryan, 2013) and throughout this book, transmedia storytelling in journalism differs as much from its counterparts in other media industries as it is similar. To illustrate this, the chapter will elaborate the flow of decisions required for a thorough transmedia plan (Moloney, 2015, pp. 99–101) and will finally present as a design example the *Refuge* project, being launched by the author and a team of transmedia journalists as of this writing. For practicing journalists, this example could be used as a customizable template in the design of new projects. For academics, this example can help inform the study and critique of transmedia journalism production decisions.

DESIGN THINKING AND TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING

There are many essentialist traps in the study and production of transmedia storytelling. Definitions of transmedia logic vary by media industry and by the researcher describing it. In journalism, understanding of the term and how to implement it differ between publisher and between editors or reporters. Similarly, as Johansson-Sköldberg, Woodilla and Çetinkaya (2013, p. 132) note, the concept of *design thinking* defies essentialist description as its character and use changes between academics and industry, and between analysts and designers. Despite this lack of codification, the common elements among these many views on design thinking are a valuable entry point to transmedia journalism project design. They can help journalists bring the care they put into the creation of traditional single stories into the planning of a complex project constructed of many interconnected parts.

Definitions

Johansson-Sköldberg et al. (2013), in their comprehensive examination of the history of the term, divide design thinking into two broad discourses. The first, *designerly thinking*, includes academic analysis along with the “creation of artefacts,” a “reflexive practice” (the self-critique of cognitive perspective), a “problem-solving activity,” and the “creation of meaning.” The second discourse, *design thinking*, they largely attribute to management practice and a business manager's role in building and maintaining a creative environment of the creation and marketing of products. This discourse, they describe as including design thinking as “a way of working,” as a “necessary skill for managers” and a “part of management theory.” Their analysis is clearly an academic one, declaring the latter discourse to be “less thoughtful and robust than contributions to the designerly thinking discourse that have been argued and reflected on by scholars over several decades” (p. 127). In simpler, less taxonomic terms, the two discourses might be better discussed as practices of *creation* and *implementation*. These terms place the discourses they astutely identified at a more equal level of importance. Creativity without implementation (or public

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