

Chapter 10

Future of Food: Transmedia Strategies of National Geographic

Alexander Godulla

University of Leipzig, Germany

Cornelia Wolf

University of Leipzig, Germany

ABSTRACT

The National Geographic Society (NGS) has always sought to incorporate new ways of media production into its working routine, thus defining standards of journalism both in technical and narrative terms. As a logical result, the NGS also relies on cross media strategies, focusing on transmedia storytelling in order to connect its audience. The “Future of Food” project is one of the largest transmedia projects in journalism. The chapter first outlines the concept of transmedia storytelling and discusses 10 qualities in the context of journalism. Secondly, the authors systematically discuss the case study “Future of Food” by applying the transmedia qualities to the project. This provides insights into the modes and combinations of story elements and allows to draw attention to challenges and opportunities for researchers, producers, and users.

INTRODUCTION

The National Geographic Society (NGS) is regarded as one of the most influential organizations for the development of international photojournalism (Godulla & Wolf, 2016). In the past decades, the foundation has always sought to incorporate new ways of media production into its working routine, thus defining standards of journalism both in technical and narrative terms. According to its own mission statement, the global nonprofit membership organization is driven “by a passionate belief in the power of science, exploration and storytelling” (National Geographic Society, 2016). However, the

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days of doorstep newspaper delivery, listening to a live radio show or being part of a national audience watching the debut of a hit TV show are mostly over. Instead, today's audiences enjoy reaching for content when, where and how they want it. (Clendenin & Stuckey, 2016)

Therefore, for the NGS extending its media brand to the digital world is a wise move as “we have entered an era of media convergence that makes the flow of content across multiple media channels almost inevitable” (Jenkins, 2013). Furthermore, the relevance of online and mobile platforms to access media brands for both news journalism and longform journalism has increased (Wolf & Godulla, 2016; Wolf & Schnauber, 2015).

As a logical result, the NGS also relies on strategies of transmedia storytelling in order to connect its audience “of more than 700 million people a month through its media platforms, products, events and experiences” (National Geographic Society, 2016).

The concept of transmedia storytelling has been applied in various contexts to date, including its integration into journalism (Gambarato & Tárca, 2017). In this context, transmedia journalism is defined as projects that allow “a story to unfold across multiple media—analogue, digital and even brick-and-mortar—in an expansive rather than repetitive way” (Moloney, 2014).

In 2014, the NGS launched its most ambitious transmedia project so far. “The Future of Food” was launched in May 2014, involving 823 stories and 472 social media posts on 41 different digital and analogue channels, including three magazines, a cable TV series, museum exhibits and organized travel experiences (Clendenin & Stuckey, 2016). True to the motto “The new food revolution. Serving more than 7 billion every day” (National Geographic Society, 2014b), National Geographic reached out to its audience, asking people to collaborate by discussing global food trends or co-create by sending pictures of places connected with the production and consumption of food, calling these places “Foodscapes.” By creating several cover stories, National Geographic Magazine attracted enormous attention to the topic, accompanying the discussion on social media using the hashtag #FutureOfFood. Being able to use a huge variety of media platforms, the foundation is able to react to an ongoing trend. Following Pratten (2015), it is important to integrate communications and customer feedback mechanisms

into the storytelling and experience design because the audience avoids and mistrusts advertising. By adopting this entertainment-marketing duality, the audience will advocate on your behalf and share content because it meets their personal and social needs, not because you have bribed them with promised rewards. (Pratten, 2015, p. 5)

Therefore, the authors consider this project to be an ideal example of transmedia storytelling in journalism. The paper will first outline the concept of transmedia storytelling and draw on ten qualities in the context of journalism. Based on Jenkins (2009a, 2009b) and Moloney (2015) this chapter focuses on Spreadability, Drillability, Immersion, Extractability, Worldbuilding, Seriality, Subjectivity, Continuity, Multiplicity, and Performance. Secondly, the authors will systematically discuss the case study “Future of Food” to provide insights into the modes and combinations of story elements and to draw attention to challenges and opportunities of transmedia storytelling in journalism for researchers, producers, and users.

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