

Chapter 11

The Transmedia Revitalization of Investigative Journalism: Opportunities and Challenges of the Serial Podcast

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ABSTRACT

This chapter analyzes the transmediality of the record-breaking podcast Serial with regard to three specific contexts: organizational structures and innovation, journalistic production, and user engagement. This case study shows that the transmedia approach of Serial cannot only revitalize long-form journalism, particularly in the case of investigative journalism, but it can also strengthen forms of slow and networked journalism. This case allows us to look at fan communities not only as an engaged audience, useful for commercial purposes, but also as a source for story development and production—even if both the journalistic production and the user engagement are confronted with specific ethical issues with regard to selective transparency and participation.

INTRODUCTION

Transmedia storytelling, coined by Henry Jenkins (2003) with regard to fictional content, has recently become a buzzword within journalism practice as well (Maloney, 2011; Serrano Tellería, 2016). The concept of transmedia storytelling involves the idea and the strategy of creating content across multiple platforms, genres and formats, that adds up to a unique story world with a cohesive narrative. In addition, it also includes activities that engage the audience by offering content that permeates the user's life (Jen-

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kins, 2009). The advantage of transmedia journalism, in the context of the new journalism ecosystem, is that it allows news organizations to take advantage of the increased communicative possibilities, where interactivity, participation as well as engagement are playing a central role—what Lewis, Holton and Coddington (2017) may call reciprocity in the journalism-audience relationship. However, transferring the concept of transmedia storytelling to journalism requires some amendments to Jenkins' original concept, as will be possible to see further down the road of this chapter.

Until today, research dealt with transmedia journalism mainly in relation to current and planned events (Gambarato & Tárca, 2017; Gambarato, Alzamora, & Tárca, 2016). This chapter takes a different approach by looking at a specific phenomenon that evolved over time. The object of study is the podcast *Serial*, a spin-off of a radio program called *This American Life*, hosted by the journalist and producer Sarah Koenig and aired on the network WBEZ. The podcast, realized in collaboration with WBEZ, “tells one story—a true story—over the course of a season. Each season, we follow a plot and characters wherever they take us” (About *Serial*, n.d.). What made *Serial* so special was that the weekly episodes a) were not based on current and ongoing events, but rather on an old (crime) story revitalized through an investigative approach; and b) became a true transmedia product thanks to the continuous interaction between the journalist and the followers, who were so deeply engaged with the story that they became in fact fans.

Notwithstanding the fact that *Serial* season one was an international hit, being one of the podcasts most listened to in the world (Crook, 2014), scientific research that looks into the transmedia journalism side of the case is lacking. Hence, this chapter analyzes the case of *Serial* from three different angles: First, it examines structural aspects like organizational and economic strategies. Second, the chapter investigates the journalistic practice by looking at the use of different platforms as well as journalistic formats in order to build a cohesive “storyworld.” Third, it studies the user engagement, looking at the materials that were produced around the story by fans and spread through different platforms. In addition, it analyzes how the author of *Serial*, the journalist Sarah Koenig, interacted with users.

This *Serial* case study may well demonstrate that transmedia journalism can actually revitalize long-form journalism, particularly in the case of investigative journalism. In other words, it can stimulate the collaborative “search for clues,” a property inherent to every good transmedia story (Phillips, 2012). Therefore, producers of the podcast take advantage of the contemporary participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006) and capitalize on it by building a transmedia narrative model—even if the starting point of the success story is an “old” media such as the radio. The case study also shows how (journalistic) archives can be put to a good use, allowing journalists to build new stories on past and already published news or even on “cold-cases.” Finally, the case of *Serial* allows to look at fan communities spontaneously built around the story not only as an engaged audience, useful for commercial purposes, but also as a source for story development and production.

Serial is an excellent starting point to study how transmedia journalism could look like in the digital age for several reasons. Firstly, its large popularity makes it an interesting case not only in the realm of transmedia journalism but also in the more general realm of transmedia productions. Secondly, it started a trend and became an object of imitation and transformation within the journalistic podcast realm. It provides a unique take on transmediality by embracing both traditional and transmedial storytelling techniques and by offering also a contemporary example of slow journalism. In addition, *Serial* experiments a new and interesting model of monetary success for podcasts. Lastly, *Serial* is also a cautionary tale in terms of engagement: It shows that there are also risks for journalism when it becomes truly transmedial, especially with regard to journalism ethics and the complex relationship between journal-

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