

How Transmedia Storytelling Is Changing TV

Lisa Hsia is Executive Vice President of Bravo Digital Media – 17 November 2011 - mashable.com.

Until now, media companies have focused on getting audiences to watch shows “live” via a TV set, where the bulk of advertising dollars are. But transmedia storytelling — which is defined as telling a story that extends across multiple media platforms (for television, it’s going beyond the on-air show) — has the ability to upend that.

“Transmedia” is one of those hot buzz words *du jour*, with conferences, articles and trend reports devoted to it. Yet it’s not a new concept. *Star Wars*, *The Matrix*, *Dr. Who* and *Pokeman* all expanded beyond their core franchise decades ago — to games, books and alternative realities.

In today’s digital era, there are new factors at play that make transmedia a potentially potent game-changer for how TV content is created. Think about it: Social TV has made television a richer two-way experience with fan participation. Nielsen’s own research shows how social TV amplifies the conversation and impacts ratings. Technology has created tools that allow the user to interact and gamify content as never before (location-based, virtual goods, augmented reality, QR codes, etc). Fans’ familiarity with and desire to experience TV content across devices other than TV has exploded.

The ability to efficiently create affordable, participatory storytelling vehicles that go beyond being “bonus extras” and spreading it through different circulation channels is changing the rules and creating a potential value proposition too big to ignore. As the forefather of transmedia storytelling, USC Professor Henry Jenkins, likes to say, “If it doesn’t spread, it’s dead.”

Beyond the Second Screen

Taking advantage of this new reality is imperative for my network, both from an engagement and value perspective. We see transmedia storytelling as our next must-do in the evolution of TV, and have recently delved into our first campaign with the show *Top Chef*.

As contestants are eliminated, they discover their journey isn’t over. Instead of going home, they will have a chance to compete in a companion digital series that will roll out each week after the on-air episode premieres. These online shows will give the eliminated contestants a chance to earn their way back into the broadcast finale. The digital series will directly impact the outcome of the on-air show. To experience the full dynamic of the competition, fans will be enticed to watch both TV and digital platforms. Our aim is to appeal to the *Top Chef* enthusiast with the deeper, more meaningful content they crave, as well as create discoverable online content that will pull casual fans into the fold. The goal is to flow content from platform to platform and to bring in the fans along the way — both the diehard and the casual. This is something that has not been possible until the scaled adoption of smartphones, tablets, social networks and gamification tools like Bunchball and GetGlue.

By unifying elements with the common goal of driving engagement around this transmedia centerpiece, we're setting out to prove that all metrics — ratings, traffic, and social buzz — will lift. We are not only trying to increase the value of the proposition in terms of engagement, but also in terms of ROI for our long-term sponsors.

If we can prove that engagement and value is increased exponentially by integrating storytelling seamlessly across media platforms, we all win — fans, content creators, advertisers. My department at Bravo will no longer be “digital,” but official “multiplatform enablers” that are seamlessly porting storytelling content wherever it best fits and wherever the best value proposition is derived from.

More Innovation Ahead

TV is on the cusp of a transmedia revolution, and there are many interesting experiments in the works.

Syfy has a show coming out called *Defiance* where a story is told on TV and in a video game: different cities with shared characters and events.

Tim Kring, one of the modern day pioneers of transmedia with his work on *Heroes* and *Conspiracy for Good*, is producing *Touch* for 2012. Here's hoping that Fox embraces his rabble-rousing transmedia tendencies.

The next, as yet unachieved milestone in transmedia is collaborative social storytelling, where fans themselves can further the plot in a pervasive, meaningful way. Smart media companies will look for ways to go beyond the “walled garden” model and turn their fans into ultimate brand ambassadors.

Whether transmedia is the new norm is still to be determined, but one can easily make the case that in today's fragmented media landscape, it will be a must for TV to survive. Perhaps the future of TV isn't either traditional television or digital platforms, but in collective intelligence — the feedback loop of the in-between.