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Transmedia storytelling and the recalibration
of power relationships in the public sphere

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Introduction

A recently discovered cave painting in Indonesia reveals that humans were telling stories and portraying them through rock art at least 44,000 years ago (George, 2019). It seems the art of telling a story through more than one media platform, or *transmedia storytelling*, to use the contemporary coinage introduced by media scholar Henry Jenkins, was familiar to the ancients as it is to us living in the digital age.

Jenkins (2006) states that:

A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best – so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction. (pp. 97-98)

Going by this definition, a person partakes of a transmedia story when he or she encounters a narrative in one medium and subsequently absorbs it via another whose expressive power supplements, extends or enriches the original story. In this regard, people today are not very different from humans in the Sulawesi limestone cave millennia ago, or, for that matter, the inhabitants of classical Greece whose oral traditions were depicted on pottery (Johnson, 2013, as cited in Freeman, 2017), or the denizens of the Middle Ages who would have encountered the story of Jesus through a mix of interrelated representations ranging from drama and religious paintings to stained-glass windows and symbolic icons (Pearson, 2009, as cited in Freeman, 2017). People have a knack for stories distributed through different media. Where twenty-first century humans differ from their predecessors is in the knowledge and

technological capacity available to them to create and widely publicize their own transmedia stories for the world to see.

The convergence of computing and communication technologies that forms the basis of the Internet and the World Wide Web has placed people in possession of digital tools and networks that enable them to inject their ideas into the world in the blink of an eye. With a computer and an Internet connection the average person can disseminate text, images, audio and video to other individuals and organizations on the electronic communications network. The digitization of media content has made it possible for distinct forms of information, such as books, music, newspapers, radio and TV broadcasts, and films to be transmitted across a single network – the Internet (Iosifidis, 2011, p. 170). Mainstream media is no longer the sole purveyor of information. The Internet offers a considerable number of the world's population the power to produce and circulate content on the information superhighway. Today, through the use of e-mail and file-transfer applications, websites like YouTube, Soundcloud and Blogger that promote the creativity and exchange of user-generated content, and social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Myspace and Instagram that facilitate the mass distribution of content (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 7), people are able to introduce their narratives in an attempt to counterbalance those put forth by the government institutions and corporations that run many of the core operations in society (Castells, 2009, p. 501). A caveat to this statement is that over half of the world's population has limited or no access to the Internet (UN News, 2019, para. 4), which means that many individuals still do not have the digital connectivity necessary to be able to participate in cultural exchanges on the Web. Hence, the arguments in

this paper apply mainly to contexts in which Internet use has become an inextricable part of daily life.

Transmedia storytelling is one way by which individuals can influence cultural exchanges in the public sphere – the arena of societal communication in which viewpoints are expressed, problems are raised and solutions are explored (Wessler & Freudenthaler, 2018, para. 1). Not all stories and ideas need to be communicated via transmedia storytelling to be effective. But using a range of media to share aspects of a narrative has the advantages of offering an audience multiple entry points into a story (Jenkins, 2006, p. 107) and of increasing the likelihood that the story gains traction in a cultural space already saturated with ideas. This paper presents transmedia storytelling as a tool by which the individual can influence public discourse and reshape the terrain on which power relationships operate (Castells, 2009, p. 79). In his book, *Communication Power*, Manuel Castells (2009) notes that traditional displays of social power have not changed. Discourse and violence are both resorted to in defining a culture (Castells, 2009, p. 79), which, to borrow Castells' definition, refers to a "set of values and beliefs that inform, guide, and motivate people's behavior" (Castells, 2009, p. 62). Transmedia storytelling is one of many ways by which social actors can enter communication networks and shape public discourse, and, as Castells (2009) puts it, "transform consciousness and views in people's minds in order to challenge the powers that be" (p. 83).

The broad aim of this paper is to examine transmedia storytelling's capacity to recalibrate power relationships in the public sphere. The connecting thread throughout this article is its exploration of transmedia storytelling as an area of

contest between power elites pushing their narratives to the public and ordinary citizens pushing back with alternative versions. Prima facie, the binary between “power elites” and “ordinary citizens” may seem simplistic for the reason that there are, in the public sphere, instances where the boundary between both groups dissolves, allowing for a merging of interests, thus making it difficult to demarcate the constructs of “elite” and “ordinary citizen”. Nonetheless, even while acknowledging that reality is more complex than the broad proposition upon which this paper is based, there is reason to believe that such a polarity exists in the public sphere. In his book, *On Political Equality*, Robert Dahl (2006) notes that even in democratic countries “political life is always dominated by elites – particularly economic elites – whose influence may not necessarily be overt and may indeed be quite hidden” (Dahl, 2006, p. 55). One reason for this, Dahl argues, is that not everybody has the political resources, knowledge and skills to influence the behavior of others (Dahl, 2006, p. 51). For example, resources like time, money, information, education, social standing, connection to political or business elites, skills in putting forth arguments or conducting cost-benefit analyses of public policies are unequally distributed in society. Hence, it is not possible for everyone to exercise an equal amount of influence in the public sphere (Dahl, 2006, p. 51). This is why the vast majority of people in society delegate their decision-making authority to those with greater political resources who are in a better position to make policy decisions (Dahl, 2006, p. 58). Hence, it is reasonable to assume that an elite-versus-ordinary citizen binary exists in the public sphere while admitting that it isn’t always possible to clearly separate the two. Turning back to the main argument in this article, by placing transmedia storytelling at the center of the contest for communication power between elites and the public, I hope to elucidate some of the practices and issues related to

transmedia storytelling while describing the top-down and bottom-up forces that seek to either directly influence the construction of meaning in the public sphere by using transmedia storytelling as a tool, or, indirectly influence the construction of meaning by manipulating the architecture of the Internet – a key site of the public sphere where transmedia stories are told. I also describe instances where power elites and ordinary citizens cooperate to bring about circumstances conducive to the telling of transmedia stories that reflect shared interests. I will start off with a few statements on my usage of the term transmedia storytelling as well as its related concepts, *spreadable media* and *participatory culture*. Then, in setting the stage to explore the contest between power elites and the public, I will describe the media terrain on which the negotiation for meaning-making power takes place, including in that section a rundown of the laws and technical measures used in restricting digital liberties, both of which are instruments that hamstring storytelling efforts by the people. I will then analyze, through examples of transmedia storytelling, some of the ways by which power elites and ordinary citizens advance their narratives in the public sphere.

Definitions

In their introduction to *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies*, a book that attempts to capture “the central yet multifaceted ways in which transmediality has come to materialize in the media landscape” Freeman and Gambarato (2019), echoing Jenkins’ view that transmedia continues to evolve according to how people respond to the challenges of delivering their messages systematically across multiple platforms, conclude that, “Transmedia, as a term, is merely a descriptor, one that requires meaningful application to different scenarios” (p. 10). Adopting their recommendation to move beyond “discipline-specific

definitions” and tempering that with a context-appropriate articulation of transmediality, I am expanding my conception of transmedia storytelling to include fictional as well as non-fictional initiatives (Freeman & Gambarato, 2019, p. 3). Thus, I will be dealing with transmedia storytelling as it is practiced in areas of human action related to fictional entertainment, and, beyond that, in areas where non-fictional storytelling is used, such as activism, journalism and education. A brief note about the importance of stories before I deal with transmedia storytelling in particular: Stories are a way of imagining what is possible in the world. They offer scripts that describe social circumstances, are a currency of social exchange, and provide opportunities for people to work on collective projects that make life a rich and diverse expression of what it means to be human (Gottschall, 2012, as cited in Konnikova, 2012; Jenkins, Lashley & Creech, 2017, p. 1062; Guynes & Hassler-Forest, 2018, as cited in Schiller, 2018, p. 104). In speaking of storytelling as a means of bringing people together one comes across the concepts of participatory culture and spreadable media: The former is the outgrowth of the Internet’s formation of a shared space in which the creation and circulation of transmedia stories can proceed with relative ease and efficiency, and the latter, is a feature of transmedia stories that makes them gain traction among an audience. Jenkins defines participatory culture as one in which anyone regardless of level of expertise in an area, say an art form or civic engagement, is allowed to create content and take part in a mutual exchange of creative works with others in a community of shared interests, with the assurance that all contributions will be respected (2006, para. 17). He describes spreadable media as content that gets passed on through a social network because of its ability to speak to the interests of those in that circle (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013, p. 13). In the book, *Spreadable Media*, Jenkins, Ford & Green (2013) do not offer a clear-cut definition of

spreadable media. Instead, they describe through case studies the key features that make certain kinds of media content spread through a networked information environment. I will touch on those features in a later section of this paper that deals with examples of transmedia stories. For now, suffice to say that the spreadability of a story “boils down to the idea that we share media in ways that are meaningful in our ongoing conversations with others” (Jenkins, Lashley & Creech, 2017, p. 1065). By creating spreadable stories and floating them within the participatory culture engendered by the Internet, people can get their voices heard in an informational environment dominated by governments and media conglomerates.

Media environment

Broadly speaking, the global media landscape consists of three bases of power – media conglomerates, national governments and ordinary citizens. For much of modern history the first two entities held most of the agenda-setting power. The era of traditional forms of mass media – newspapers, radio and television – saw the majority of people consigned to the passive consumption of information transmitted by a select group of creators and decision-makers who got to decide what the rest of the population should be exposed to. To be sure, people could comment on issues they were concerned about, by calling in during a radio talk show or writing letters to the press, but their impact wasn’t as immediate and sustained as is now possible with the Internet where one can post a video, circulate it within a social network, and get a response in a matter of minutes. The Internet has put the channels of communication and an array of content production tools in the hands of citizens, thus creating a third base of communicative power that can fight back with a swift dose of its own ideas in the public sphere. But, as Yochai Benkler (2006) tells us, even if the extent to which

we can be influenced by owners of mass media has been reduced, it hasn't altogether disappeared (p. 133). Governments and media conglomerates, through their financial, legal and technological expertise have substantial power to not only decide the kind of content we receive but also technically alter or disrupt the channels through which we access, create and distribute content. A brief tour of the communication aims and strategies of these power centers will clue us in on how they intervene in the public's activities on the Internet.

Media corporations are profit-making entities whose focus is to sell their content and products to as many people as possible. Governments view the media as a tool to shape the public agenda. Both vie for the public's attention and, therefore, are in a continuous tug-of-war for a share of the public mind (Noam, 2016, p. 4). The government for reasons of national security, public interest, preservation of local culture and its own policy interests is sensitive to the media's dissemination of content that it perceives injurious to those interests. The media, on the other hand, bristles at the state's efforts in restricting free speech, especially if those curbs threaten its bottom line. This tussle for dominance in the information environment is apparent in jurisdictions where freedom of expression is respected, and largely absent in regimes that view such freedoms with suspicion. Generally, all media companies tend to operate within the regulatory framework established by the authorities. The US government's launching of antitrust investigations against Facebook and Google, which turns on the question as to whether tech companies are using their monopoly power to maintain dominance on the Internet, is an example of the ongoing tussle between the state and media (Grimaldi & Kendall, 2019, para. 3). Some may argue that the Internet is a global environment and therefore any nation-based regulation of

it isn't feasible. I disagree. Goldsmith and Wu (2006) offer a few reasons why the Internet "is becoming a collection of nation-state networks" (p. 149). First, state actors have become adept at firewalling their countries to create national networks that keep out information deemed harmful to local values. Second, governments are willing to prosecute media and technology companies for harmful Internet communications initiated from abroad (pp. 149-150), a case in point being *Dow Jones v. Gutnick* (2002). When Australian billionaire Joseph Gutnick sued Dow Jones & Company for libelous statements about him on the *Wall Street Journal's* news website wsj.com, whose server was located in New Jersey, Dow Jones' lawyers argued that Australian courts had no power to rule over the legality of information on a computer in the United States even if that information had showed up in Australia (Goldsmith & Wu, 2006, p. 147). The Australian High Court countered that the place where a person downloads material from the Internet is the place where the tort of defamation is committed. Dow Jones agreed to pay Gutnick damages and legal fees to settle the case (*Dow Jones v. Gutnick*, 2002, as cited in Goldsmith & Wu, 2006, p. 148), lending credence to the point that the Internet isn't a borderless world.

Governments maintain control over content and distribution channels via a range of overt and covert measures, with examples of the former being the licensing and regulation of media companies, the censorship of content, a recourse to defamation laws as a way of silencing government critics, and, the latter being the creation of computer programs to surveil and manipulate the Internet (Oster, 2015, p. 131; Ziccardi, 2013, p.188). It has become commonplace for governments to issue cease and desist letters and take-down notices to search engine service providers like Google and Yahoo demanding they remove content from the Web (Ziccardi, 2013, p.

201). Media companies do that to ordinary citizens, too, as will be shown later through a case involving Warner Brothers' legal threats against teenage *Harry Potter* fans who set up websites with domain names containing words and phrases from the book. But turning back to the state's checking of the media, the United States government, for example, inundates Google with letters demanding the removal of pages, which have allegedly infringed copyright or trademark, from search results, and the tech giant usually conforms (Goldsmith & Wu, 2006, p. 75). Governments are also capable of interfering with all intermediary nodes connecting the sender to the receiver. Physical communication lines, the infrastructure behind wireless services, search engines, Internet Service Providers, users' computers – nothing is beyond the reach of blocking and filtering technology (Goldsmith & Wu, 2006, p. 71). According to the OpenNet Initiative, governments regularly engage in technical blocking, which involves blocking specific webpages, sites, IP addresses and searches that include blacklisted terms (Ziccardi, 2013, p. 201).

Media companies also use technical means to gain an edge. Shortly after news about the antitrust suits against Google came out in September 2019, the *Wall Street Journal* published results of an investigation exposing the ways in which Google manipulates its algorithms to alter search results (Grind, Schechner, McMillanand & West, 2019). It was revealed that Google makes algorithmic changes that cause big businesses to appear above smaller ones, removes sites even if they aren't required to do so by US or foreign law, and filters out what it regards as controversial search results on hot button issues such as immigration or abortion (Grind, Schechner, McMillanand & West, 2019). The report also stated that Google jacks up leading websites like Amazon and Facebook, and even made adjustments to

search results on behalf of eBay, a major advertiser on its platform (Grind, Schechner, McMillanand & West, 2019). Bear in mind that Google owns over 90 percent of the total market share for search engines. What this means is that people's search results are pre-determined by social actors with vested interests. Social media companies, Facebook and Twitter, aren't any different. Facebook uses EdgeRank, an algorithm that prioritizes users according to how active they are on the site (Bucher, 2012a, as cited in Van Dijck, 2013, p. 49). Twitter applies filtering algorithms over tweet content, altering what we see on the *trending* and *following* sections of its platform (Van Dijck, 2013, p.69).

More nefarious are the covert tactics that governments employ to control cultural exchanges on the Internet, proving Lawrence Lessig's prediction that governments will outdo private companies in designing Internet code that controls free speech and individual agency (Goldsmith & Wu, 2006, p. 72; Lessig, 2000, para. 3). An internal document prepared by the British intelligence agency, Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), describes tools that agents can use to inflate page view counts on websites, amplify approved messages on YouTube, post material on the Internet and attribute it to someone else, change photos on social networking sites, and send emails through somebody else's email address (ACLU, n.d.; GCHQ, 2008; Greenwald, 2014, para. 14). The intelligence document was developed by a GCHQ unit called the Joint Threat Research Intelligence Group whose aims are "(1) to inject all sorts of false material onto the internet in order to destroy the reputation of its targets; and (2) to use social sciences and other techniques to manipulate online discourse and activism to generate outcomes it considers desirable" (Bell, 2015, para.1; Greenwald, 2014, para. 4).

With an arsenal of such fine-grained instruments governments and media corporations aren't only capable of deciding what topics receive attention on the Internet; they can recast the very regions of public debate – give an impression of autonomy while they whittle it away secretly (Benkler, 2006, p. 142). What chance do citizens have of deciding the content of culture, then? Fortunately, governments and corporate behemoths aren't homogeneous, cohesive structures; they have fissures and fault lines, pockets of opposing interests, inter-departmental conflicts and so on (Castells, 2009, pp.157-158). Hence, public opinion is never a matter of one-sided control from the top down (Castells, 2009, p.178). Ruling institutions do attain ideological hegemony, but that influence has only been possible through an alternating series of coercive actions and compromises with other groups over a period of time (Storey, 2009, p. xviii-xix). People can take advantage of the opportunities that arise out of this dynamical relationship to influence change. One way to do that is to use the Internet to tell stories that counter dominant forms of thinking. People can respond to narratives of surveillance, censorship and control by offering counter-narratives that celebrate human creativity and dignity. Better still, they could present their ideas through a transmedia story, which, with its ability to cover different angles through multiple platforms is very much a Hydra that cannot be overcome by a single blow. But the nature of that many-headed creature changes according to who is telling the story. We now look at how power elites and ordinary citizens have used transmedia storytelling to claim territory in the public sphere.

Russian games

The 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics was the subject of two transmedia stories that sparred against each other for puissance in the public sphere. Russia's mainstream news coverage of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics was matched by Arnold van Bruggen's and Rob Hornstra's journalistic exposé of the injustices the people of Sochi suffered in the lead-up to the games. Together, state-controlled Channel One, which broadcasted the event locally, and the International Olympic Committee's broadcasting service, which transmitted the television and radio signals worldwide, had the studios, production equipment, cameras, drones, online streaming channels and social media sites necessary, to, in the words of Russian sports director Nikolai Malyshev, "show all the fun" (Sandshark, 2013, as cited in Gambarato, Alzamora & Tárca, 2016, p. 1453). The Kremlin's surveillance to ensure controversies surrounding the Games do not obstruct its heroes and medals narrative, coupled with the IOC's sifting of the media for messages sullyng the Olympic brand prevented a meaningful back-and-forth between mass media and social media. The transmission of ideas was pretty much one-way traffic from top down. Mainstream media focused on sports coverage while its social media channels chimed in with commentary on permitted subjects like the Russian medal count. This was transmedia storytelling with all the *interactivity* and nothing of the *participation* in it. As Jenkins (2014) puts it, interactivity has more to do with the technology of a media platform, while participation is to do with the cultural practice of creating and sharing content (p. 283). To explain further, Kremlin-approved social media channels allowed people to engage with interactive features that pushed them along a preordained pathway of passive consumption. Blocking and filtering software prevented them from circulating content that modified the party line (Gambarato, 2012, as cited in Gambarato,

Alzamora & Tarcia, 2016, p. 1460). Bruggen's and Hornstra's transmedia documentary *The Sochi Project* (thesochiproject.org) did the opposite. It spurred participation. It's portrayal of Sochi's real face – through text, photos, maps, music, videos, touring exhibitions – contrasted the exorbitant games with the distraught families who had been kicked out of their homes to make way for the Olympic buildings. It was synergistic storytelling that encouraged people who came across one branch of the story to check out other parts for a fuller account. This narrative, ignored by state-controlled media, lit a fuse on the Internet, leading to the creation of social media protest sites like the “No Sochi 2014” Facebook page (The Sochi Project, n.d., para. 17). One might assume that visitors to those protest sites didn't follow prescribed channels of interaction. They acted as “gatewatchers” (instead of gatekeepers), scoping mainstream coverage, comparing it with elements in *The Sochi Project*, and passing on their own perspectives through the network (Bruns, 2006, as cited in Gambarato, Alzamora & Tarcia, 2016, p. 1449). *The Guardian* described the cross-platform distribution of multiple storylines as an apt reflection of the “fractured time we live in” (O'Hagan, 2013, para. 12).

#NeverAgain

One thing that protest movements in the past decade have had in common is their reliance on social media for mass mobilizations. The Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street were movements that gained momentum on the Internet (Castells, 2012, pp. 2-3). A big part of what activists do to galvanize the public is transmedia storytelling. Spreading a vision via a series of narratives, each through a medium suited to the message opens multiple doorways into a movement. As people cross-relate the various strings of a story they begin to understand the relationships between

the parts of a movement within the context of the whole. Allowing them the option of fitting their own stories into the overall narrative brings them closer to a movement, because it erases the “us helping them” mentality that alienates people (Srivastava, 2016, as cited in Jenkins, 2016, para. 25). Jenkins calls this *collaborative authorship* – where people are counted in as co-creators, generating sub-stories around the urtext in a way that adds new themes without veering from the substance of the project (Jenkins, 2006, p. 321; Srivastava, 2009, as cited in Hancox, 2018, p 333).

The #NeverAgain movement had all of the above features. The gun control initiative began in February 2018 shortly after the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, in Parkland, Florida. In what was perhaps the most significant status update since Occupy Wall Street the United States government was reminded that, with social media, teenagers can rally a nation for political change in a matter of days. Besides the psychological force of a movement that pits common sense against the brutality of guns, the reason the protest has lasted is its usage of what Jenkins and Lopez (2018) refer to as activism “by any media necessary” (p. 3). Videos, posters, memes, infographics, blogposts, podcasts and social media sites conveyed facts and personal stories. #NeverAgain’s on-the-ground protest movement called March for Our Lives, or MFOL, brought the energy created online into the streets (Witt, 2018, para. 1). Live streams of protest marches were made available on the MFOL website. MFOL’s YouTube Channel had videos that used a remix aesthetic to critique clips of President Donald Trump and other NRA-supporting politicians. These highly spreadable videos acted as seeding crystals around which others attached their own videos and texts, expanding the movement’s presence online (Jenkins & Lopez, 2018, p. 11). The young activists didn’t need mainstream media’s permission to spread their

stories. The likes of Twitter and YouTube did it for them. Social media is to teenagers what people's radio stations were to activists during the 1960s (Jenkins & Lopez, 2018, p. 11). But it would be too broad a brushstroke to say that big media and grassroots media are perpetually locked in an adversarial relationship. Media gatekeepers tend to frame debates according to dominant political interests, but it is harder to do that when citizens' narratives on social media are challenging the definition of what the day's news should be. #NeverAgain's social media activity brought big media into line: CNN interviewed the activists, *TIME* magazine shortlisted them as its Person of the Year for 2018, the *Washington Post* continues to cover the movement's progress, and Penguin Random House published a book based on the movement (Haynes, 2018, para. 10; Meyer, 2019, para. 13). Still, transmedia storytelling has two handles: It can serve democracy; it can also kill it (Jenkins & Lopez 2018, p.14). Counter protestors eager to discredit the movement circulated a doctored image showing one of the movement's leaders tearing up the US constitution. Again, the binary division of power elites versus the people is challenged. Ordinary citizens themselves, an agglomeration of different interests, can jeopardize a movement. But think back to that GCHQ document; its aim "to use social sciences and other techniques to manipulate online discourse and activism to generate outcomes it considers desirable" (Bell, 2015, para.1; Greenwald, 2014, para. 4). State actors can also throw a wrench into a protest movement by introducing their brand of discord-sowing, spreadable media online.

In the fictional universe

The protection of intellectual property (IP) rights is another area where power elites wrangle with the public for cultural primacy. In 2001 Warner Brothers issued legal

threats to children who ran websites based on the fantasy world of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books (Jenkins, 2006, p. 195; Stendell, 2005, p. 1557). Shortly after securing the movie rights to the books, which gave Warner control of "Harry Potter" and several other terms appearing in the stories, the studio scoured the Internet for domain names that purportedly infringed its film rights. Subsequently, it issued cease and desist letters to numerous youngsters around the globe many of whom had started the websites for fun and had no interest in commercial gain (Ingram, 2001, para. 6). The move backfired. News reports portrayed Warner Brothers as a bully harassing youngsters whose only crime had been to be imaginative. A key figure in the saga was 16-year-old Heather Lawver from the US who had set up an online newspaper called *The Daily Prophet* – named after the fictional wizarding newspaper in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. After learning that the fantasy novel was performing its magic in the real world by getting children to read, Lawver, keen to do her part for children's literacy, set up her web-based newspaper. The paper covered the happenings at Hogwarts. Only 13 when she started the paper, Lawver acted as managing editor and invited teenagers from around the world to contribute articles to it. In an open letter to her writers' parents Lawver described her online paper as something that "opens the mind to exploring books, diving into characters, and analyzing great literature" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 179). Lawver encouraged her writers to learn from her edits and improve their writing. The idea was to take the pressure off children who wanted to write by getting them to pen stories based on the *Harry Potter* world they were already familiar with. Starting from scratch is difficult for any writer and Lawver understood that. Many artists start by imitating the works of others and Lawver's publication was using that approach to get children interested in writing. Turning for a moment to Jenkins: He states that a transmedia story should combine

three ingredients: *radical intertextuality*, *multimodality* and *additive comprehension*.

Briefly, the first refers to a process whereby elements of a story move and unfold across texts within the same medium; the second is a process whereby elements of a story move and unfold across different mediums – the word medium, here, is defined as the means of cultural expression, itself, a combination of the semiotic substance and the material delivery of that expression, be it music, dance, painting, video games, online newspapers, comic books, animated TV series, horror movies or action movies – and, the third refers to the effect of each new text adding to the understanding of the story as a whole (Jenkins, 2011, para 17; Ryan, 2016, p. 38). Summing up, Jenkins says: “For me a work needs to combine radical intertextuality and multimodality for the purposes of additive comprehension to be a transmedia story” (2011, para. 17).

From that perspective, the young journos at *The Daily Prophet* would have counted as transmedia storytellers. By developing personas for themselves, for example, by imagining they were related to the inventors of the quidditch brooms and writing news from that perspective, the children were, in fact, advancing plot points from the novel into an online gazette.

Warner Brothers’ threats to sue became a symbol of corporate media’s tendency to stifle creativity and free speech in the name of commercial interests. The company eventually backed down, but it adjusted its policy in dealing with fan appropriations of copyrighted content, by incorporating their creative labors into its promotional efforts, confirming Jenkins’ observation that corporate media views grassroots participation as something they can “start and stop, channel and reroute, commodify and market” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 175). Companies are entitled to flash their proprietary rights at those who seek to exploit content for commercial gain. But there

is also a sense that exclusivity gets in the way of people's right to participate and enjoy the fruits of science and culture. As Lea Shaver argues, IP protection is essentially a barrier to access because it excludes others from adapting a work or idea, or from using it to improve their own inventions. She recommends that instead of limiting the right to access by emphasizing the protection element of IP law, it might be worthwhile limiting the protection element by emphasizing access (2010, pp. 172-173).

Not a zero-sum game

The contest for cultural power between elites and ordinary citizens isn't a zero-sum game. Governments, the media and the public are separate complexes made up of diverse interests constantly in a bout or bargain with each other. Culture is always a work in progress; constantly evolving based on a dialectical interplay between "structure and agency", "resistance and incorporation" (Storey, 2009, p. xix). Media conglomerates have inter-company deals, partnerships, mergers and acquisitions all of which determine what kinds of narratives they advance in the public realm. The state is made up of different political institutions that jostle against each other in the governance of society. The public is made up of subsets of interests that converge or diverge depending on what the contemporary challenges they face are. So each base of power has internal forces that keep it in check even as it negotiates with other power centers. Therefore, while the question around which this paper is based assumes a polarity (power elites versus citizens) reality is complex. There are, in the public sphere, instances where the interests, maneuvers and narratives of elites and ordinary people merge, regardless of their status on the

decision-making hierarchy. The following examples of transmedia storytelling illustrate this point.

Transmedia gardens

The Hamilton Gardens in New Zealand is a prime example of transmedia storytelling jointly supported by the state and citizens. It runs on funds from the government, community groups, local trusts and the general public, and is open to the public free-of-charge every day of the year (Hamilton Gardens, 2019). Occupying over 50 hectares of land alongside a scenic stretch of the Waikato River, the garden in the city of Hamilton is divided into a series of sub-gardens, each representing a significant cultural moment in history. The Italian Renaissance Garden and the Japanese Garden of Contemplation are just some examples in this showcase of the best that has bloomed in the past 4,000 years of civilization (Hamilton Gardens, 2019). The site of the Gardens has had many lives. It was a Maori settlement, a British military post, and, at one point, Hamilton City's rubbish dump (Hamilton Gardens, 2019). Today, it is filled with gardens that grew out of books. Each one was built based on detailed research into a relevant period – its social structure, belief system, philosophical outlook, attitudes to nature, gardening practices, scientific and artistic developments, lifestyle, and so on. The gardens are a physical manifestation of intangible ideas: A transmedia conversion of imaginary spaces into real ones (Matt Hill, 2016, as cited in Freeman, 2019, p.125). Consider the Mansfield Garden based on New Zealand author Katherine Mansfield's short story *The Garden Party*. Walking in it one is transported to the early twentieth century Wellington garden that inspired the story. Its plants and architecture are reminiscent of the Edwardian period. The marquee on the lawn tennis court, the sandwiches on the table under it, the musical

instruments that the band in the story would have played are all set up as if the party is about to commence at any moment. A short walk from there is the Picturesque Garden based on Mozart's Opera, *The Magic Flute*, whose storyline alludes to the ideas of Freemasonry. Or enter the Tudor Garden where Queen Elizabeth might have passed through during the annual tour of her kingdom. Turn anywhere and worlds that have vanished into history books reappear in the present (Hamilton Gardens, n.d.).

Director of Hamilton Gardens Dr. Peter Sergel designed the gardens and has been involved in all aspects of its management for over two decades. I interviewed him for this paper. "It starts on the dining room table," he says, referring to the design plans, history books and other research material that cover his workspace at home. "I read everything I can lay my hands on." A man of few words, Sergel speaks volumes through the gardens. He has turned texts into real spaces, and visitors to the gardens, he informs me, have transformed those spaces back into words. People have written plays and composed poetry based on the gardens. For example, at a pavilion in the Japanese Garden of Contemplation there is a plaque on the wall with lines of haiku inscribed on it, which allude to sunlight forming ripples on the eaves. If one were to stand under the pavilion on a sunny day, he or she would notice ripples on the eaves caused by reflections from an adjacent pond – the essence of the haiku is translated into a movement of light on the roof. Not only are the gardens a transmedial creation; they are also transmedially experienced, and continue to inspire ordinary citizens' transmedia creations. Kidd (2019) calls heritage sites like these "present-day storytellers" (p. 272).

From story to song

My own research project under the Master of Arts program at the Waikato Institute of Technology (WINTEC) is an example of transmedia storytelling born out of a merging between the individual and the institution. In making that claim I'm drawing from Csikszentmihalyi's conclusion that creativity isn't solely the product of individual agency. As he puts it:

What we call creative is never the result of individual action alone; it is the product of three main shaping forces: a set of social institutions, or field, that selects from the variations produced by the individual those that are worth preserving; a stable cultural domain that will preserve and transmit the selected new ideas or forms to the following generations; and finally the individual, who brings about some change in the domain, a change that the field will consider to be creative.

(Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, p. 325)

Similarly, my transmedia storytelling project relied on an institutional framework that provided the context for my experimentation and innovation. The guidance from supervisors, the peer-review process and access to research databases formed part of what Csikszentmihalyi described as the "field". The one-year research effort addressed the question: "How does the author-musician interact with self-penned stories to compose songs based on those stories?" and used the methodology of a practice-based research (PBR) to examine, document and report the process by which an author-musician composes songs from self-authored works of fiction. The very decision to view the project through the lens of transmedia storytelling was the by-product of discussions I had with my supervisors. To put it another way, the situating of my practice as a singer-songwriter and author of fiction within the discourse of transmedial creativity was the direct result of my link with a "stable cultural domain",

in my case WINTEC, dedicated to the development of new ideas (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, p. 325). My research output consisted of a recording of songs and a book containing the stories, lyrics and chapters on creative process. Two complementary aspects of transmedia storytelling reveal themselves through the work. One is what Fiske calls the “producerly text”, which refers to content that opens itself up to multiple interpretations (Fiske, 1989b, as cited in Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013, p. 201). Such texts are rich with allusions, contain ambiguities and mysteries, and point to untrodden paths and avenues waiting to be imagined, all of which may inspire a reader, listener or viewer to create his or her own texts based on the original (Fiske, 1989b, as cited in Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013, p. 201). The other is the notion of “affinity spaces” – informal educational settings in which individuals with a shared interest get together, practice it, and learn from each other in the process (Gee, 2018, para. 2). My work combines both ideas. The producerly nature of the stories, songs, and essays on creativity draws audiences into multiple layers of meaning. They can enjoy the hidden understandings that emerge as they delve into the texts. But if they are interested in creating their own stories and songs, they could get together with others of like mind and start an affinity space to collectively explore my story-to-song methods and launch into their own acts of composition. There is also the option of exploiting the affordances of social media to exponentially increase the reach of that collective agency. For example, a website with the relevant social media links could be set up to provide access to some of the stories, songs and processual notes. Visitors to the site can respond to my texts and produce their adaptations and innovations and share them with others in the group. They can post comments, ask questions and learn from each other. By interpreting my texts in the backdrop of their interests and passing along something of themselves as they weave through the open spaces of my

work the spreadability of all our creations increases, making each node in that affinity space an attractor of new connections (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013, p. 201). The fact that a transmedia project developed within the parameters of formal education can also lead to informal learning spaces on the Web speaks to the ease by which the practice of transmediality adapts itself to educational goals in the digital age.

Transmedia education

The New Zealand government's drive for digital fluency among citizens is another example of elites and the public working together to develop the technical skills necessary for participation in the public sphere. I will start with providing some background on what the government is doing in education before introducing transmedia storytelling as a teaching tool that dovetails with the government's educational goals. The rapid development of new technologies means that people will have to learn a variety of digital competencies in order to engage fully in society (Kellow, 2018, p. 77). Cognizant of this, the Education Ministry recently made it compulsory for children to learn skills ranging from computer programming to digital app development. The new curriculum was implemented after extensive public consultation (Ministry of Education, n.d., p. 2). As part of the revamped technological curriculum youngsters, starting from the age of five, will not only learn how to code and engineer basic digital solutions, they will also familiarize themselves with the social, environmental and cultural effects of technology on humans (Kellow, 2018, p. 76). A curriculum like this, which seeks to merge computational skills with an understanding of culture, might benefit from transmedia storytelling as a teaching tool. Transmedia storytelling's ability to impart the big picture while drawing attention to the details and their interconnections will be useful in helping students

identify relationships between diverse subjects. Jenkins calls this bringing together of multiple narratives to create a holistic view of the story universe, *world building* (Jenkins, 2006, p. 118). *Robot Heart Stories* is one example of an educational project that uses transmedia storytelling: An alien robot crash-lands on Earth and students are asked to help it find its way home. Students create videos, photos, writings and drawings, using their knowledge in science, geography and math to help the robot understand Earth. Each piece of work a student submits increases the robot's signal strength as it makes its way back to its home planet (Jenkins, 2012, para. 2). This project not only developed digital literacy in students; it also helped them understand how different subject areas relate to each other (Gambarato & Dabagian, 2016, p. 229). A similar project introduced into New Zealand's digital curriculum might aid in helping students see how the various subjects they study relate to the computer literacy classes they take.

Conclusion

Castells informs us that power is exercised by the making of meaning in people's minds (2012, p. 5). Telling stories is one way to introduce new ideas, viewpoints and visions into the world. Some of these stories are for entertainment while others aim at improving society. Among the different kinds of stories that people create or experience is the transmedia story. With its capacity to distribute different storylines across multiple media platforms while communicating the unity of the story world from which the various threads arise, the transmedia story serves as a useful tool for learning and expression. By looking at a subject area or a sphere of human activity through the lens of a transmedia story, one might be able to gain an in-depth understanding of the interconnected systems and crosscutting interests in that

particular area of inquiry. People can also express a story transmedially in order to attract others to participate in and spread aspects of that story. This might help their stories stand out in the public sphere and perhaps even influence the policies that determine the architecture of the communication technologies within that sphere.

Word count: 7,582

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