**Exploring transmedia in documentaries**

Posted by [Edward J Delaney](http://documentarytech.com/?author=3) on May 17, 2011 · [3 Comments](http://documentarytech.com/?p=8161#respond)

The question of what transmedia means and how it applies to documentaries is up for varied interpretations, but the notion of multi-platform storytellign is at the root of it. The question of why documentary filmmakers would broaden to transmedia is of extending storytelling in a way that enhances the film’s performance, or the economic viability of the film, or both.

Tribeca Film Institute [has a piece](http://www.tribecafilm.com/tribecaonline/future-of-film/Transmedia-for-Social-Documentary.html) on social documentaries using transmedia, but the first task is that of definition. Author Anjelica Das says, “Whether called *transmedia*, *multi-platform*, *cross platform* or just *cross media*, filmmakers from all genres no longer just make films.”

“Transmedia” is a term generally attributed to the MIT Media Lab’s Henry Jenkins (Now at USC), and generally used in connection with entertainment media. It involved creation of stories that might reach to film, books, video games and music, and also to such interactive places as fan fiction. Journalism has often defined itself as evolving into “multi-platform,” the notion of reporting reality using media forms such as print, video and audio.

Regardless of the term, the intention of spreading into multiple media forms is much easier now, due to digital media. To do a film/book project a decade ago would have likely created costs that would not have been matched by revenue; to do a film/web project creates scales of economy that might increase revenue.

Mixed media is not new, but it feels new. Fifty years ago, the most common transmedia experience might be seeing the movie made from the book; there were also books made from the movies, called “novelizations.” There were TV shows made from radio shows. All involved “extending” the story using multiple media forms, and perhaps enhancing the story through what each form delivered best.

In the Das post, she says,

The transmedia world as demonstrated by pioneer [Lance Weiler](http://www.tribecafilminstitute.org/filmmakers/newmedia/116683924.html) can be daunting for the grassroots social documentarian. In the ultimate expression of an immersive storytelling experience, Weiler created an ongoing narrative beginning with film, and in its latest iteration, as a real time interactive gaming experience taking place in Park City. Through cell phones, audience members became active members of [a](http://www.hopeismissing.com/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) *[Pandemic 1.0](http://www.hopeismissing.com/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)* [population](http://www.hopeismissing.com/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) being tracked online.

Those sorts of approaches don’t seem to fit documentaries the way they do feature films, but crossing platforms can be beneficial in many ways for docs.

More recently, we’ve seen film/book releases that include such successes as “Restrepo” (co-released with co-director Sebastian Junger’s book ‘War”) and director Nancy Porter’s PBS documentary “Louisa May Alcott: The Woman Behind ‘Little Women,’” co-released with co-producer Harriet Riesen’s Alcott biography (a project [featured at this site in 2010](http://documentarytech.com/?tag=harrier-reisen)).

But transmedia can extend much farther, and the obvious place is a website that is more than just a promotional device for the film but rather a place to extend and engage.

Here are some ideas worthy of exploration:

1) **Use a website to provide an extended text narrative that might add again to the project.** Think of the old liner notes that would fill the cover of a record album, or perhaps the text of a catalog for a museum exhibit. Facts in a documentary often outpace the space to embed them, but interested viewers will seek out more. An extended essay that informs and supports the project can be useful.

**2) Extend through bonus footage.** The edit of a good documentary pares down to essentials what is needed, but must also fit a fairly proscribed package of being “feature length” – 70 to 120 minutes, with the latter being a “long” doc. Extra footage can tell its own story.

**3) Interactvity through audience engagement.** These are real stories, and people might have real stories to tell in concert with it. Stop thinking of film as a one-way transmission. A forum or discussion page in which people can share their experiences on the topic can create a center of discourse (and don’t make it one in which people talk about the film, make it one that keeps telling the story your film tells).

**4) Interactivity through crowdsourcing.** People who can become part of the community a documentary film builds can often have much to share. If you make a documentary about a place or event, a place for audience photos of that place or event can become fun.

**5) Apps and devices put transmedia at one’s fingertips.** Devices such as smartphones and tablets allow new forms of transmedia to emerge. A digital book released via iPad can be another level of your project, and not expensively.

**6) Think soundtrack, not just music.** Collaborating with musicians who can provide music for the film but also release that music as its own package can work to enhance the film and make the music more visible. Finding musicians who see the possibilities can lead to some great results.

In the end, it’s the definition of media that’s changing. Film, like other forms, no longer have the “hard borders” of old media. The filmmaker who can explore and exploit the possibilities can often make a unique success.