

The Mediasmith Project

An IATL Fellowship project led by Ruth Leary, Principal Teaching Fellow, Centre for Cultural Policy Studies, University of Warwick

The Mediasmith Project began as an open ended and experimental project to explore the potential of transmedia and documentary filmmaking practices in teaching and learning in higher education from a methodological perspective.

The initial proposal outlined a series of ambitious objectives:

- To bring together a group of inter-disciplinary colleagues to explore transmedia documentary as an alternative research and assessment method
- To host three intensive workshops facilitated by producers, documentary makers and creative technologists to empower participants to produce their own transmedia projects with minimal access to expensive technology and technical expertise
- To recruit a student researcher who would also participate in the workshops and contribute to the organisation and dissemination of the project
- To disseminate project learning via a project blog and Twitter feed
- To host a final symposium (June 2014) to present projects and debate the value of a transmedia approach in research and teaching
- To produce a transmedia project about the Mediasmith Project
- To co-produce a pilot transmedia documentary about a street dance project in the Favelas in Rio, Brazil with documentary maker Mags Gavan of [Red Rebel Films](#), as a possible case study for a new option module in the Centre for Cultural Policy Studies

What Does a Transmedia Approach Mean?

There is no fixed definition of the term ‘transmedia’; often confused with cross-media (a single story re-told in several ways) it usually refers to storytelling and marketing practices within the film, TV and video games industries:

“In transmedia storytelling, content becomes invasive and permeates fully the audience's lifestyle... A transmedia project develops storytelling across multiple forms of media in order to have different "entry points" in the story; entry-points with a unique and independent lifespan but with a definite role in the big narrative scheme.”¹

Concepts such as ‘story universe’ or ‘storyworld’ apply here and the concept is tightly bound up with the marketing of content.

In the context of The Mediasmith Project, a transmedia approach was taken to mean the convergence of multiple forms of media to produce (and tell) a story, either simultaneously or asynchronously. The journey towards a working definition was a core part of the project.

Project Touchstones

The Mediasmith Project was inspired, to some extent, by Ruth's prior involvement in *Happenstance*² (an AHRC, Arts Council and NESTA funded digital R & D project which embedded teams of creative technologists within arts organisations). To this end, it was important that the workshops and project methodology embodied the principles of:

¹ Nicoletta Iacobacci, (2008) Head of Interactive TV/Eurovision at the European Broadcasting Union <http://www.lunchoverip.com/2008/05/from-crossmedia.html> Accessed 4th January 2016

² <http://happenstanceproject.com>

Openness: exploratory and open ended, enabling the exchange of skills and knowledge, and the sharing learning whilst doing.

Collaboration: individuals and interaction are recognized and valued.

Trans-disciplinarity: inclusive of all disciplines and facilitating co-operation between them.

Improvisation: there is no 'right' or prescribed way, permitting failure, valuing process *and* product and embracing emergent, rather than planned, strategies.

Sharing: skills and knowledge exchange, simultaneous dissemination of learning.

The Mediasmith Project Workshops

Three workshops were designed to take participants on a journey towards producing their own transmedia project and were held at monthly intervals during the first half of 2014. An open invitation was sent to all academic staff.

Workshop 1: Methods & Media: Documentary R & D

An introduction to the concept of transmedia documentary as a form of interdisciplinary enquiry with a focus on filmmaking fundamentals - from developing the initial idea to shooting high quality video on a smartphone. The workshop also included a practical session in which participants explored various tools and techniques including using a simple video editor (WeVideo) to produce their first short film.

Workshop 2: Digital Storytelling

What is digital storytelling? This workshop invited participants to think about the role of narrative and interactivity and provided an opportunity to explore how ethnographic and visual sociology approaches can inform the filmmaking process. What kind of ethical and academic questions do we need to consider? How can we create digital assets through play, performance and visual enquiry?

Workshop 3: Remix & Representation

How do you put it all together? In this workshop documentary makers and editors shared the secrets behind editing and curating visual media. How do you avoid copyright pitfalls when using archive material, photos, music and other audiovisual content? We discovered how techniques such as data visualisation or other analytical tools can bring data and empirical evidence to life and communicate complex ideas in simple but beautiful (i.e. filmic) ways.

The workshops were attended by a committed and interdisciplinary group of colleagues from Engineering, WMG, English, Politics and International Studies, Statistics, Sociology and Warwick Business School.

The project also involved a number of MA students from the Centre for Cultural Policy Studies who documented and disseminated the project as it progressed through video, photography, live blogging and social media updates (Twitter and Storify).

From Symposium to Popathon

An early lesson revealed that, when combined with a relative lack of domain-specific expertise (in terms of digital literacy, technical filmmaking skills etc.), mapping the terrain beyond conventional methodological approaches is inherently collaborative but also resource and time intensive. Added to reservations about scheduling, the proposal for a symposium to showcase participants' projects proved unfeasible. Consequently, IATL approved an alternative plan to host a final event in the shape of a Popathon.

Popathon at Warwick

Popathon³ is an international series of hackathon events bringing together digital storytellers, technologists and designers to prototype the future of web-native storytelling i.e. narratives that are told on the web. The Popathons are run by facilitators Philo Van Kemenade, a creative technologist, and Gilles Pradeu, a documentary filmmaker, and enshrine the principles of learning, making and sharing. The aim is to experiment and create prototypes: projects that try out a focused piece of functionality by using the capability of the web to create an interactive story experience. At the end of the Popathon all the prototypes are made available as open source for others to use and develop.

Philo and Giles co-hosted a Popathon at Warwick in February 2015. They facilitated three teams of researchers, students, technologists and filmmakers (including external guests from BCU, Coventry University and regional arts organizations) in the production of three web-native stories. In just 24 hours teams conceived a narrative, volunteered or sourced suitable datasets, and threw themselves into the design of their prototype ready for a public unveiling of their work at the end. A full report of the Popathon and videos of the prototypes in action can be found on The Mediasmith Project blog.

The Mediasmith Project in Review

When and how do you evaluate such an open-ended project? Where has it lead? In terms of legacy, the project is probably best viewed as a catalyst for alternative practices, debate and the seeding of future projects. Some things went as planned; others did not, but the ‘snowball effect’ continues. These can be loosely categorized under the following headings:

Objectives v Outcomes: what changed?

The ambition to co-produce a pilot transmedia documentary, *Dancing Out of Danger*, proved difficult to realise in practice for reasons of funding, time, expertise, and personal security. Similarly, Storybuilder, a platform developed by a data journalism start-up in Georgia, presents a practical and aesthetically pleasing solution to the challenge of producing a reflexive transmedia documentary of the Mediasmith Project without the need for a production team or web development expertise. You can explore a more comprehensive account of the project on Storybuilder here:

<http://storybuilder.jumpstart.ge/en/the-mediasmith-project>

Outputs: tangible research and teaching initiatives connected to The Mediasmith Project

- Digital storytelling is now an integral and assessed part of the curriculum within the MA programmes at the Centre for Cultural Policy Studies
- The production of films and digital objects is becoming increasingly established within different disciplinary research and teaching contexts provoking debates about appropriate assessment practices and methodological rigour e.g. the *Representing Depression, Aesthetics, Insight and Activism* module led by Professor Stephen Shapiro, Department of English
- Clear synergies emerged between The Mediasmith Project and the wider ‘umbrella’ of Digital Humanities practice and Ruth continues to contribute to this debate
- A number of inter-disciplinary and collaborative relationships have resulted from the project, most notably in the form of an ESRC Impact Accelerator funded research project, *MyChainReaction*,⁴ led by Professor Jan Godsell (WMG), Antony Karatzas (WMG) and Ruth Leary (Centre for Cultural Policy Studies)
- Ruth has been invited to consult on participatory research methods by an AHRC funded research team at the University of Hull investigating Hull’s status as City of Culture 2017

³ <http://popathon.org>

⁴ <http://www.mychainreaction.co.uk>

Outcomes: key lessons

This is just a short summary of some of the lessons and questions that have emerged during the project so far (it is by no means exhaustive):

- **Filmmaking is inherently collaborative:** this has raised some important questions about the nature of collaborative work, authorial control and how this compares with a more conventional academic research process; at what stage does the collaboration take place? Who are the collaborators? What is the nature of their contribution? What is my role as teacher or researcher; author, director, producer, facilitator, technician, database manager, editor, developer, curator, or all of the above?
- **Technical proficiency:** learning new skills, developing expertise in software and new digital tools is time-consuming (and genuinely fear provoking for some) leading to questions; should I learn to do it myself or outsource? What is the best use of my time? Do I need to learn how to code or become proficient at all aspects of filmmaking in order to produce a high quality digital object/film (that the terminology to describe digital outputs is problematic is also a moot point)?
- **Creating and managing digital and audio-visual materials:** how do we collect, store and retrieve digital and audio-visual data? What are the implications for archiving digital data collected in multiple formats? Who owns what? Where are the boundaries? Does a transmedia project that sparks an ongoing conversation have a finite end? How do you capture and evaluate the (intrinsic) value of this conversation?
- **Visual incompetence and new forms of literacy:** whilst we are relatively accomplished in the production of literary texts within academia, we lack visual literacy and need to cultivate a new aesthetic approach to the production of knowledge i.e. it's a steep learning curve and, as in the production of texts, it concerns the combination of craft and content – it requires mastery. This also raises questions about how to offer appropriate support for students when producing such hybrid 'digital texts' (even if they demonstrate seemingly well developed visual literacy and technical skills). What does mastery look like? Who is qualified to judge and assess this kind of digital work? How should we assess this kind of digital work?
- **Accessing resources:** if research methods and outcomes deviate from the conventional norms, how do we access funding and other resources to produce this kind of work? The AHRC funding contribution to Joshua Oppenheimer's feature documentary, *The Act of Killing*, is a timely and encouraging example, but it may well be a case of piloting projects in the hope that funding will follow changes in practice.
- **Copyright vs. DIY remix culture:** the legal and moral obligations that we are required to respect when using found digital content are increasingly challenged by the cultural practices of remixing and re-distribution without the copyright owner's permission. What is our position within the academy in relation to this debate? How do we enforce the legal and ethical use of content without constraining creativity and intellectual freedom? These conversations segue into discussions about open access etc.
- **Public engagement and dissemination:** a transmedia approach lends itself very well to engaging audiences beyond the academy in a number of ways. Firstly, through 'crowdsourcing' participant contribution from the outset of a transmedia project so

that the public are involved in the co-creation of knowledge and meaning throughout the process. Secondly, through the interpretation, (or re-interpretation) of research/knowledge in an alternative form (short film, art installation, performance etc.) which provokes and invites an ongoing discussion/interaction following the 'house party' transmedia model proposed by Henry Jenkins.⁵ Thirdly, by sparking conversations and new connections which can open up new avenues for research and public engagement.

- **Transmedia production as a curatorial practice:** the methodological approach that we have explored throughout the project generates a richer set of materials/digital assets/documents to synthesise into a meaningful whole. This 'whole' also has many possible shapes and forms and may not be entirely within the researcher's control. How do we develop this kind of curatorial expertise?
- **Links to an emergent set of practices/discipline:** during the project there has been a growing realisation that these practices fit within the emerging areas of digital humanities and digital sociology in particular. The Mediasmith Project has a significant contribution to make in this debate.
- **Academic rigour and peer review:** what are the ethical considerations that must be taken into account when working in this way? How do we control for subjective bias and implement academic rigour throughout the process? Should provision for peer review be designed into the process and if so, how? What regulations need to be considered when engaging with the public online?

All of these points represent an agenda for further discussion and this belongs to a much broader discussion about the use of digital tools in research and teaching. The answers are, no doubt, to be found in the continued exploration and refinement of approaches such as those proposed by The Mediasmith Project.

For more information please visit The Mediasmith Project Storybuilder site:
<http://storybuilder.jumpstart.ge/en/the-mediasmith-project>

The Mediasmith Project blog:
<http://mediasmithproject.com>

⁵ Henry Jenkins, 21st March 2001 *Transmedia 101*, http://henryjenkins.org/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html, accessed 4th January 2016