

Strategic Decisions for Transmedia Journalism Project Development

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What are critical decisions for the best production of a transmedia journalism project? These questions come from analysis the National Geographic Society's (NGS) "Future of Food" project as an example of success and complication in transmedia production.

1. **What is the storyworld?** — Defining a real-world storyworld is an act of delimitation rather than expansion. As any subject taken from the real world interconnects infinitely with every other, more than a broad subject identification is required here. For example, the NGS's Future of Food storyworld would have arguably encouraged more exploration if the subject matter were taken from a smaller subset. Rather than "the future food" as its umbrella, the project would have been more cohesive Had it covered fewer pieces of this complex issue.
2. **What are the starting-point stories?** — Like a good news lede, the initial stories set a tone or an operatic overture for what will come after. Here the NGS performed very well, introducing the project and its scope on every channel. The flagship piece in the May 2104 issue of National Geographic was an excellent introduction.
3. **Who are the key publics for each story?** — Here one should think in great detail about who can best use the information from individual stories or their extensions. Are they young? Old? Rich? Poor? Do they play games? Liberal? Conservative? Are they policy makers or voters? Do they hunt or fish? Cook or play chess? Are they named **Etaoin Shrdlu**? One should "talk" to them through the stories. Most good journalists have a reader in mind as they write, photograph, produce or edit.
4. **What media channel would best reach those publics?** — This also requires specific and detailed research using, if possible, the demographic and audience research databases used in advertising. Identify in very specific detail, what media channels are most likely to reach the publics that can best use the information gathered. Partnerships will likely be necessary to get those stories published, and agreements that are beneficial to both transmedia producer and publisher are possible.
5. **What media forms will best tell the story?** — One should think critically here about what works, not simply what one is most confident producing. Text is best for context. Video tells powerful stories that have a strong narrative arc and puts the flesh on characters better than almost any other form. Still photos isolate discrete moments. Audio engages the imagination. Games describe systems. Artifacts connect. Illustration accesses the camera-inaccessible. The channel necessary to reach one's public may create a limit on the possibilities here. If necessary, channel could be revisited in light of the best form for the story.

6. **What genre, length or structure will best serve a story's public?** — Different channels encourage different levels of engagement. A New Yorker reader flips open the cover expecting a 10,000-word story, but a Vice reader might expect a quick short-form video. One should provide content that appeals to attention spans that may vary from 30 seconds to two hours. Most journalists are comfortable selecting the appropriate genre for a story, however, much may be learned from the demographic study of the target public. Stories should be produced for the reader, not for the journalist him- or herself.
7. **How should these stories interconnect?** — The network one builds is the key to good transmedia storytelling. Carefully plan what stories will interlink. Are they hot-linked in digital spaces? Referred to in analog spaces? Are source materials and external content available with a click to provide transparency? This planning could extend to the design of a reader's investigative path through the project either as a trail of breadcrumbs or with a more gameful quality if desired. Whether the public follows that path or not, the design will only improve project structure.
8. **How can these stories be conversations?** — Though comment blocks on digital stories are common, they alone do not make for a conversational space. Engagement will increase, I argue, if the reporters and producers of a transmedia journalism project enter that conversation with responses and updates. Public contribution should be enabled in the project, allowing engaged readers to help build stories. This will increase their ownership in the story and their engagement, and it will enable more transparency and a multi-perspective view on the subject. These spaces cannot be left journalistically unattended, though. Public contribution should face the same editorial rigor as the contribution from contracted journalists, or the space should be clearly identified as amateur production.

Audience Research Resources

(with valued assistance from Natalia Tingle at the University of Colorado Libraries)

Demographics and Psychographics:

Statista

Statista aggregates statistics and studies from market researchers, organizations, specialist publications, and government sources.

\$49 per person per year with a free trial.

Simmons OneView

The data from Experian Simmons' National Consumer Survey (NCS) allows you to create in-depth analysis of the US consumer. You can use this data to determine consumer product, media, and lifestyle preferences.

Though this is a very expensive subscription service, most college and university libraries have academic licenses that you can use on-site in the library. The compromise is that Simmons academic licenses only access three-year-old data, so in 2016 you could only read data from 2013.

Media Reach and Circulation:

Quantcast, SimilarWeb, other web analytics providers

Quantcast reports offer details about a website's traffic, including visitor demographics and interests, without a subscription. Though this site is not as robust as some other options (comScore, Alexa), this service does not require registration or subscription to view a good deal of data. SimilarWeb is like Quantcast, but with less free data. Also includes app usage in addition to website traffic.

- App Annie is a freemium source for app usage and engagement data.
- Sprout Social is a subscription source for multi-platform social media measurement and engagement.

SRDS

SRDS from Kantar Media is a directory of consumer and business publications, newspapers, local media, newspapers, and websites. The database provides contact info, circulation, and general audience demographics. Additionally, Nielsen Segmentation and Market Solutions is available in the "Other SRDS Services" menu. Use this tool for detailed information about audiences by DMA or by demographic, including popular media outlets by market segment.

Expensive but available through most college or university libraries for on-site search.