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# Bristol Social Marketing Centre
# Spotlight on Social Marketing #22: **Using transmedia stories to engage audiences with social issues**

**Transmedia Storytelling**

The success of social movements like the Arab Spring and Occupy has brought into question whether mass media exposure holds the same power in the current media landscape of social networks, user generated content, and public online discourse. Other tools are increasingly being used for sharing knowledge and changing the way that the public looks at an issue. Transmedia storytelling is a tool that has become an effective way of engaging audiences with social issues. This practice involves telling a story over multiple platforms using a number of media formats. With an emphasis on world-building, audience engagement, and co-creation, transmedia storytelling is a form of participatory culture with "relatively low barriers to entry, artistic expression, informal mentorship, sharing of one's creations, and a sense of community" (Brough, & Shresthova 2011, pp. 2.6)[i].

Narrative is a powerful tool for sense making, identity formation, and ideology construction. The internal narratives of protest and political movements interact with issues of power and mobilization (Polletta, 2009)[ii]. By using storytelling as a collective activity to engage people through social media many social movements are gaining the publicity they need directly through user-shared content online.

**Spreadability and Drillability**

Transmedia stories use the qualities of spreadability and drillability to engage their audiences. Spreadability uses "a mix of top-down and bottom-up forces" to share material and involve audiences in media participation. In this mode the audience is involved in, not only sharing, but also framing the media content (Jenkins et al 2012, p.2)[iii]. Spreadability can be used to increase civic engagement and motivate political participation. By using easily circulated media such as YouTube videos and Twitter messages, social movements can draw attention and support to their cause. Drillability is a complimentary property that encourages long-term engagement by immersing the audience in the world of the story. It is the depth to which an audience can become engaged with the story beyond their initial contact (Jenkins et al, 2012).

**Implications**

These techniques are increasingly being used to raise public awareness of humanitarian, environmental and educational issues through immersive storytelling, audience engagement, and game-play. Proponents of narrative transportation argue that if a story is sufficiently absorbing the individual may alter their real-world beliefs to reflect the effects of the story (Green & Brock, 2000)[iv]. Approaching issues like climate change (Tomorrow Calling, 2007), natural disasters and pandemics (Aftershock, 2008; Coral Cross 2009), and impending oil shortages (World Without Oil 2007) in this manner allows the audience to not only learn about the issues but also potentially look at them from a new perspective (McGinn et al 2009)[v]. The spreadable and drillable aspects inherent in transmedia storytelling can be utilized as a powerful "catalyst for collective identity formation and mobilization" (Brough, & Shresthova 2011, pp. 55). Transmedia narrative is used in this way by the non-profit organisation Invisible Children to maximize their impact on the wider online community. This allows the organisation to engage with a wide variety of audiences and to change over time. It also facilitates the constant revision of content while reinforcing key messages (Swartz 2012)[vi]. Other


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transmedia projects such as Conspiracy for Good (http://conspiracyforgood.com), Random Acts (http://www.therandomact.org) and the Harry Potter Alliance (http://thehpalliance.org), take a more direct approach, using narrative engagement to mobilise online communities to take direct action or raise funds for charitable projects.

This type of storytelling sustains social movements, helps to develop their collective identities, and can be used to compel moral action (Polletta 2009). Telling stories that expose the social structure that is usually taken for granted and subvert the dominant power relations can play a part in enabling collective resistance (Ewick, & Silbey 2003)[vii]. Stories that circulate in online communities linked to a movement can provide an alternative point of view to the dominant perspectives in society, and can help to paint a picture of an alternative future that the movement should strive to achieve (Polletta 2009). Transmedia storytelling can be seen as a "key strategic media form for an era of social networked social movements" (Costanza-Chock 2011, p. 115)[viii].

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