



## What Is the Cultural Function and Value of European Transmedia Independents?

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This article first builds on the semiotics of culture approach and argues that the increasingly widespread transmedia practices may be valuable for contributing to the dynamics of how modern cultures are innovated. Transmedia practices facilitate inter-semiotic translations at all levels of cultures, which conditions increased dialogism and the feasible evolution of these cultures. In the second part of the article, we demonstrate that there are hindrances in the existing media systems that may prevent this potential being fulfilled. It is often argued that transmedia can empower micro-sized content providers to participate in such dialogues and in the production of culture. However, recent studies demonstrate that in a European context the transmedia era may instead enforce the oligopolistic structures of media markets.

*Keywords: transmedia, cultural semiotics, Juri Lotman, media pluralization, political economy, micro-studios, creative industries, media policy*

### Introduction

Why is transmedia “out there”? What is its value for the citizens, consumers, and producers of our contemporary cultures? Should there be more transmedia or not? Such are the broad questions that this article presents and investigates. This implies that questions about the values and wider purposes of transmedia practice are not commonly found in the literature. Much of the scholarly analysis is dedicated to investigations of new narrative affordances of this cultural phenomenon; some have investigated the

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operations of associated industries or the audience reception of transmedia texts. When it comes to “transmedia purpose” the mutuality of effects of economic rationales (informed by the economics of scope logic) and new artistic opportunities are discussed. Often, the democratizing potential of participatory storytelling is also highlighted. At other instances the (entertainment) value of immersive affordances of transmedia and the associated cognitive experiences are discussed. The present article, however, aims to present a slightly different rationale. We propose a case for understanding transmedia practices as part of the broader dynamics that provide culture with innovations and generate cultural heterogeneity and pluralism—important preconditions for the sustainable evolution of societies. The argument this article makes is, first, that inter-semiotic translations between media and modalities are the core mechanisms of (semantic) innovations. The outcomes of such translations are never trivial; they bring about changes in what is revealed to interpreters and, as a result, effectively broaden the possible variety of perceptions, meanings, and texts/representations available in a culture. In this context, as transmedia practices are becoming increasingly strategic and universally deployed by global media industries, they may, in the ideal instance, usefully contribute to the processes of “reflexive modernization” (Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994) of contemporary societies. Nurturing inter-semiotic translations could mean the introduction of not only a new mainstream mechanism for generating new meanings, but also, due to the participatory traits of transmediation, a mechanism for filtering out the most accepted and consensual ones. In this way, transmedia has the potential for facilitating societal dialogues that both condition change as well as eventually bring about new stabilities.

Our second main question is whether this potential can be adequately fulfilled in contemporary media systems. We will review and summarize several recent studies, including our own, that have, in one way or another, investigated the industry structure, practices, and policies, with the aim of making assessments as to whether the existing industry setups support the unleashing of the full potential of transmedia.

The specific focus of this article is on the media systems of smaller European countries, where the media markets are smaller and the players in those markets also tend to be significantly smaller. The market entry barriers for such small content production companies (independents) are higher, and their capabilities for innovation by their own means are limited. Thus, this article differs from some of the previous studies that have discussed the operations of big players in large markets, such as the Hollywood film industry or U.S. television networks. We aim to analyze the rather different rationales of why transmedia happens in much smaller markets. Transmedia discourse usually celebrates certain bottom-up dynamics of culture production, together with being optimistic about the extent of market-driven transmedia practices. Our aim, however, is to demonstrate that in specific smaller European countries, the evolution of this practice may often be driven from the top, by various local and national authorities, who seek cross-sector spillovers between the arts and the information and communication technologies (ICT) sector. The expectation is that such spillovers would condition the emergence of disruptive innovations and lead to job and wealth creation.

In conceptual terms, the unique approach of this article is a tentative combination of the semiotics of culture approach (Juri Lotman and others) with an analysis informed by the political economy approaches to media studies. Although the analytic utilities of this combination still need to be tested, we

expect there to be some useful complementarity. Since the semiotics of culture approach is designed to interpret the dynamics that bring about cultural change at both micro and macro levels of cultural systems, it is, therefore, also equipped to address factors that may limit that change. In relation to this, the political economy approach to the study of media and communications is set to critically analyze the techno-economic structuring of media systems and to address its inherent limits in overcoming various scarcity conditions—for instance, when it fails to generate enough cultural diversity and pluralism in contemporary societies. We aim to diagnose the health of the existing transmedia production systems, especially in the smaller countries of Europe, and address some of the limits therein.

### **How Does Transmedia Affect Culture and Its Evolutionary Dynamics?**

Our message is simple: Transmedia is not only fascinating as a cultural phenomenon, but it may also contribute usefully to the feasible evolution of contemporary societies. Transmedia is about translating ideas, concepts, cultures and texts, from one sign system to another, from one site of representations or subsystem to others. We argue that such translations are important because they are always nontrivial. They are about changes in meaning and therefore constitute the core mechanisms that innovate culture. In this way, transmedia facilitates the emergence of innovations (i.e., what is or can be represented) and as such, eventually, the generation of plurality in culture. But this is not all: translations also constitute dialogues between different sign-systems, traditions, and subspaces of culture. Translations as dialogues facilitate interchange between systems and spaces. As a result, something is always shared between these spaces. Paradoxically, translations facilitate not only innovations but also continuities in a culture. In this context, we propose that transmedia practices may contribute to the dialogic coevolution of a culture's subsystems, facilitating certain stability and feasibility in how a culture changes.

In the following subsection we extend our argument by relying, in the first instance, on the semiotics of culture approach and more specifically on the work of Juri Lotman, since this is the strand of semiotics that focuses on how change in culture is motivated and conditioned at all levels or sites of global cultural entirety. Lotman's organismic or ecosystemic approach to culture as "semiosphere" (Kull, 2005, p. 208) consolidates the conceptions of unity and diversity, as well as statics and dynamics. Semiosphere is "semiotic space, outside of which semiosis itself cannot exist" (Lotman, 2005). Therefore, whether we think of human culture in general or of a particular cultural community, using the notion of semiosphere implies a certain unitary system, which precedes and is the condition for the existence of any singular isolated language and of any act of communication. Thus, there is always the past and what is established: the existing systems and conventions of communication and discursive constellations establish a frame as to what may be communicated or interpreted at any present. However, although the past has a conditioning effect, the future of the semiosphere is, at any point in time, unpredictable. This is due to the semiosphere being an inherently infinitely heterogeneous and asymmetric space. In Żyłko's words, "If we follow the semiospheric approach, culture takes the shape of a heterogeneous whole bustling with multiple rhythms of development and transient dominants" (2001, p. 400). Or, as Lotman puts it: the rule of its organization is "inherited internal irregularity" (2005, p. 213).

The first source of the semiosphere's asymmetry is the hierarchical distinction between its core and periphery. While the former—the area of dominant and law-forming semiotic systems is more static and protected—the area near the semiosphere's external boundary is characterized by the acceleration of semiotic processes and possible innovations. The balance between these opposite structural positions is, however, always disturbed, as the elements of periphery are constantly seeking to affix themselves to the core structures "with a view to displacing them" (Lotman, 2005, p. 212). This perpetual dynamic can be exemplified by the path of such initially alien or law-defying ICT applications, services, and platforms as Skype, Spotify, and Kickstarter, to determining the processes in the formerly established fields of telecommunications, the music industry, and art endowment systems, respectively.

Semiosphere's second source of asymmetry is the fact that it is crisscrossed by an unlimited number of internal boundaries between diverse subsystems that could exist in the form of fixed languages (such as film language) or cultural communities (Finnish game developers), as well as much less organized systems (European television production), their fragments (Nordic TV drama), and even single texts ("The Killing"), that are all situated at culture's different hierarchical levels. The latter are again constantly disturbed by communication collisions between systems that are structurally uneven and also develop at different speeds. Lotman's example is that the language of literature and the language of fashion evolve autonomously at very different paces, but for something new to emerge occasional interchanges between such systems are needed. A trivial example would be the contemporary interchanges between film language and videogame development that tend to result in new game formats or interactive forms of audiovisual storytelling.

The relation between the two subsystems is constituted by a dialogue in the situation of mutual untranslatability, which is caused by their structural asymmetry and manifested in the impossibility of exact back-translation. A basic example of such relation would be the one between image and word, which could model one and the same object, but while trying to translate the visual version into a verbal one and back again, we can never get exactly the same image as before because the modeling principles of each system are different. However, the motivations to attempt such translations are always in place because the dialogues/translations open up new possibilities to represent the reality in a different or more adequate way. Nevertheless, frequent interchanges between untranslatable subsystems bring about an increase in the system's heterogeneity. For instance, if stories or other elements (images, music, phrases, characters, represented relationships, etc.) in films are translated or recycled into other media or modalities, then the result is not only pluralization in terms of forms but also that which can be represented and communicated, whereas each new way brings about an expansion in terms of the heterogeneity of meanings available to participants of the particular semiosphere.

Sometimes such translations could bring about what Lotman calls "cultural explosions." Explosion is the moment of unpredictable change and of open possibilities in the process of communication, the "moment of equalization of all oppositions" (Lotman, 2009, p. 158) and is thus directly linked to innovation of the system. In more concrete terms this means that two or more systems are in contact and via this dialogue a new unity emerges that may encompass these previously distinctive systems. Thus, the new system is not only convergent but may also be divergent and emergent, since it may diverge from previous settings and emerge as a new auto-communicatively self-assuring system. This emergence may

then, however, disrupt the existing cultural and media ecologies; for instance, when a new cultural form and a subsystem such as “social TV” emerges from the dialogic activity between existing systems, such as television, social media, telecommunications, and so on.

The possibility that the new unity emerges by the means of auto-communication is especially important here. Within the semiotics of culture paradigm, the immense heterogeneity brought about by communication with another is balanced by a culture’s capability of communicating with oneself and about oneself (i.e., cultural auto-communication, which presumes and effects an understanding of oneself as a distinctive and holistic subject) (Torop, 2008, p. 393). The argument is that all cultural subsystems are constituted by the means of auto-communication—bigger and stronger ones more effectively, smaller and weaker ones less so. As they all auto-communicate, the existing cultural complexities and (power) asymmetries are created (see Ibrus, 2014). However, it should be emphasized that auto-communication in this approach is not limited to mnemonic functions of facilitating continuities but is also related to creativity (see Ojamaa & Torop, 2014). Here, the aspect of viewpoint is central, since all cultural subsystems exist in complex environments that consist of systems of varying sizes—some are partly intertwined, some encompass multiple smaller ones, some constitute parts of various larger ones. As they all auto-communicate, it not only forces these systems into dialogues, but we should also realize that what on one level could be perceived as a dialogue appears on yet another (higher) level as an auto-communicatively operating system. For example, the popular practice of creating and uploading audiovisual remixes within the Internet environments, such as YouTube, Tumblr, Reddit, or 9gag can be conceptualized as communicative acts between the sender and the receiving community on one level. On another level, however, the practice of combining preexisting textual fragments to create a new intertextual whole always entails a (more or less conscious) aspect of studying the constructive principles and the language of the given texts, which makes it an auto-communicative act, an act of dialogue with oneself as a member of a given language community. As the environment is in constant flux, due to auto-communicative activities of others, all systems are constantly forced to adapt, transform, or restructure themselves by the means of auto-communication, to the point that the whole “human culture [can be regarded as] a vast example of auto-communication” (Lotman, 2001, p. 33).

This conceptualization of systems’ auto-communication and how dialogues are effectively translations conducted by auto-communicating subsystems has a direct implication for understanding the functioning of transmedial communications. The creation of a transmedia text starts off in one language, usually verbal, and the process of spreading the story onto multiple media platforms can be conceptualized as a nonlinear series of inter-semiotic translations. The latter term originates from Roman Jakobson (1971). It complements the notions of intra-linguistic (rewording) and interlinguistic translation, referring to “interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of non-verbal sign systems” (Jakobson, 1971, p. 261). In contemporary discourse, inter-semiotic translation implies transfer between two different sign systems, which do not necessarily have to be verbal (Torop, 2000).

But when translation happens, then who translates? Where is the agency? Based on the above, we suggest, on the broader scale, that individual media, as they auto-communicatively re-create themselves as subsystems in the complex environment, are effecting such translations—for example, in instances when videogame industries translate and adapt audiovisual media’s representative conventions

or storylines. However, from a different perspective, we can also interpret a transmedia project as a self-generating logos and a system that adapts itself for different modalities, media, and platforms. Yet, as the literature on transmedia practice (Dena, 2009) evidences, there is normally a tension between the logic of the transmedia world and the logic of the individual media (Altheide & Snow, 1979). Thus, all of these systems as they auto-communicate, are also forced to interact. These interactions will affect how inter-semiotic translations take place from media to media, and therefore, how the transmedia worlds can be spread (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013) across media and how much room there is for explosions/innovations that may have enriching effects for the general cultural evolution. The evolution of transmedia worlds is, therefore, dependent on the dynamically changing power asymmetries between the semiautonomous systems (Ibrus, 2014).

Much transmedia literature focuses on the question of whether adaptations (such as novels to films) are part of transmedia or not. Some authors (Evans, 2011, p. 27; Jenkins, 2006, pp. 95–96) have suggested that adaptations are in principle not part of transmedia storytelling practice, since the idea of the latter is that the representations on distinct platforms should all contribute something different and complementary to the all-encompassing narrative, while adaptations only repeat the same story in different modalities/media. We posit that such distinctions are irrelevant (see also Saldre & Torop, 2012, pp. 33–34). As referred to above, inter-semiotic translations paradoxically happen in the situation of untranslatability, as we can only speak of conditional, not absolute, equivalence between the elements of different semiotic modalities. While in the situation of univocal correspondence between the elements of two systems, there is only one possible adequate translation result; in the situation of conditional equivalence, however, a text in one language has a range or series of equally adequate translations in the other. Therefore, any inter-semiotic translation is always both serial and partial by nature—there is no perfect translation, and no translation could possibly exhaust all the meanings of the original. Although retrospectively, the realized translation is often perceived as the correct or even the only possible one, in the creative translation process itself, the result is unpredictable.

What is more, as the work by Torop (2000, 2008) has evidenced, culture can be described as a process of total translation with a range of subtypes (of translation); whereas some of these may alter not only the communicated meanings but also vary greatly in the eventual form of representation. Texts and even text groups can, for instance, be translated to become symbols or meaningful fragments within other texts. Torop calls these “intertextual” and “intertextual translations” (2000, p. 72). What this suggests is that adaptations as inter-semiotic translations can sometimes be very transformative. As Scolari (2012, 2013) has observed, even if narrative is shrunk or compressed in the translation process, as in the case of trailers, comics, posters, and so on, it may expand its meaning, and this is an example of how inadequate or only conditionally adequate translations constitute the mechanism of creative thinking (Lotman, 2001, p. 37). On the other hand, when texts or their fragments are extratextually translated into elements in other texts of different modalities, their complex semantic interrelationships constitute, in effect, a transmedial unity. What is more, Torop (2000) also distinguishes “metatextual translation” (annotations, reviews, commentaries, parodies, advertising and other marketing, trailers, mash-ups, etc.)—that is, when such forms of translations happen, the outcomes are, to an extent, about each other. In aggregate, such metatextual translations/relationships constitute an auto-communicative unity—the more translations, the stronger (more established) the emergent transmedia universe.

What can be inferred from this is that the more there are such translations/dialogues in a culture, the more there are opportunities for new seasonable cultural unities that are at ease with their environment. Therefore, inter-semiotic translations are a tool of meaning making for cultures and communities that can be used to arrive at new but socially and culturally germane representations that facilitate both continuities but also enable timely readjustments in the complex and dynamically changing environment.

It should be emphasized that the ongoing transmedia emergence is not only about the concerted spreading and translating of content between media of different modalities and affordances but also about the dispersion of agency in terms of who spreads and translates. Much has been written (for instance: Bruns, 2008; Burgess & Green, 2009; Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2007) on the possibilities for users/audiences/consumers to participate in and contribute to the larger processes of the production of culture, as conditioned by the evolution of the Internet and networked communications (i.e., the "network society") (Castells, 1996; van Dijk, 2006). In light of the conceptual framework outlined above, we propose that, in an ideal instance, this development may also contribute to the increased dialogism within societies.

Networks consist of nodes and each node may have an opportunity to facilitate dialogues between others. Nodes receive information from other nodes, and it will depend upon their particular motivations for self-expression or identity construction whether they combine the received texts; modify, adapt, or remix them; filter them out; and post further. As a result of this possibility, if the networks filter, they contribute to the overall exchange and dialogues among the existing subsystems of the society, and if they remix and modify they may facilitate what Lotman would have termed micro-explosions, but from the perspective of innovation studies this could be referred to as incremental (textual) innovations. This dynamic relates to conceptualizations of collaborative innovation (Baldwin & Von Hippel, 2009) whereas a presumption is that aggregation of incremental innovations may lead to radical and paradigm shifting innovations. In the context of such network dynamics, Potts, Cunningham, Hartley and Ormerod (2008) have suggested that social networks as markets have emerged as one of the main innovation coordination mechanisms of the postindustrial era. The social network markets distribute and filter out innovations that are valuable, as well as coordinate collaborative work that may take these further by continuing to adapt, modify and change.

In this context the transmedia practices of media industries emerge as part of the historic momentum that consists of technical advancements (such as Internet infrastructures or the new interactive terminals of all kinds) and the new kinds of social relationships that rely on these infrastructures. Transmedia practices are part of the latter but also include the industry strategies that in turn build on the new social and participation dynamics of their audiences, as well as on the associated rationales of the "network economics" (Liebowitz, 2002). What this article aims to highlight is that these practices and strategies combined may bring about more inter-semiotic translations and dialogues at various levels of culture. Transmedia, as it becomes increasingly popular and nurtured by the mainstream fractions of the global creative industries, has the potential to contribute to interchange and translations between different media, to effect new kinds of cultural dynamics, and to facilitate the emergence of socially pertinent representations and sign-systems, healthy cultural heterogeneities, and as such, the

feasible evolution of societies. The question, however, is whether such function is in reality carried out. This is what we aim to observe in the following sections of this article.

### **The Political Economy of Transmedia Production: Some Issues**

#### ***Professional Identities: Related Resistances, Path Dependencies***

In many small European countries, it is often the public sector that drives and invests in the various transmedia-related initiatives. This can be related to the neo-liberal public administration rationales to invest in digital creative industries start-ups, with the expectation for scalable growth that would spill over and generate growth locally. Enterprises that build their businesses on transmedial communications in various ways are generally seen as fulfilling these rationales and are therefore popular with authorities and their various funding schemes for creative industries, innovation, or similar. Transmedia is, therefore, often steered from the top, driven by expectations that market dynamics will happen after coordination by the states, cities or other authorities. There is also a tendency for many of the region's countries to assign their public service broadcasters (PSB) to put emphasis on innovation and to commission innovative multiplatform content to motivate the rest of the audiovisual media ecosystem to innovate and experiment with new forms of content, distribution, and business. Such innovative, transmedia-like projects are also what we refer to when we use the term multiplatform in the rest of the article. We do not discuss the instances of multiplatform distribution that do not entail any kind of inter-semiotic translations. In any case, as a result of the given policies, the main funders of transmedia projects in Europe are often PSBs. It should be emphasized that there is also the public service media rationale behind such initiatives, although slightly modified for the network era. Historically, it was the universal coverage and the provision of a free service accessible to all that were considered among the most important of the PSB principles because of the social value of reaching a mass audience—understood to condition the emergence of a shared public space for public discourse. In the digital era a new consensus has emerged that on-demand, cross-platform access is the new universality (Debrett, 2009). Still, the focus of this article is on the new structural objectives of PSBs to coordinate innovations that are happening in the media sector—a function often ascribed to PSBs across Europe (Bechmann, 2012, p. 903). As reported by Bennett, Strange, Kerr, & Medrado (2012), in the United Kingdom there is evidence that such a function is being carried out with a positive effect. The two large British PSBs—the BBC and Channel 4—as they have committed to multi-platform commissioning, have effectively incubated a number of new companies dedicated to digital content and have more broadly generated economic value and growth in the independent sector, eventually helping to make the United Kingdom a world leader in transmedia content.

But how is it in smaller countries? A study of Estonia's film industry's clustering tendencies in recent years (Ibrus, Tafel-Viia, Lassur, & Viia, 2013) included a scenario of local authorities investing in a new interindustry cluster, combining film production with the ICT industry. The underlining idea would be to motivate interindustry cooperation and, related to this, to facilitate the emergence of transmedia innovations. Although some fractions of the film industry were fascinated by the scenario, there were also others who were not and raised the problems of the possible loss of identity (as a film industry) and the artistic quality of their work. They were vocal in expressing that, more often than not, there is very little

artistic value in transmedia productions, and therefore, the new commissioning codes by many of the region's PSBs to always commission a transmedia package was experienced as problematic. Therefore, we need to recognize how transmedia, especially when it is driven top-down by public authorities, could be interpreted as threatening the autonomy of a media domain—the film medium in this particular case. If multi-platform storytelling is the prevailing trend in the television content industries—as demonstrated by many (Bennett et al., 2012; Clarke, 2012; Doyle, 2010; Evans, 2011; Sørensen, 2014)—and documentary films are rarely commissioned without transmedia extensions, this is often experienced as de-powering by documentary filmmakers. They want to concentrate on their own art and craft—documentary film—and not lose focus by the need to develop in parallel, for instance, clever social media marketing add-ons for which they do not have, in most instances, the skills, previous experience, or emotional attachment. We need to recognize that from the perspective of independent filmmakers the transmedia obligation is often perceived as a challenge that is not well received. It is seen to undermine an established and distinctive art form and a profession and can be interpreted therefore as a social, if not a political, issue.

With regard to the social dimension, in the first instance, this concerns the lack of relevant skills and training. Acquiring new skills and knowledge is not only time-consuming but also costly and therefore constitutes significant thresholds in countries where mainly micro-sized production companies operate in limited markets. However, all over the world new training programs and curricula on transmedia storytelling or crossmedia production are emerging, which will eventually provide the industry with a new breed of professionals. In one of our previous studies (Ibrus, 2012), we learned that occasionally the frustration felt by audiovisual professionals toward the need to exercise transmedia practice is significantly relieved by the arrival of the new transmedia consultants. This is a visible tendency, at least in the countries of northern Europe. These consultants or transmedia producers usually work with several projects at a time; take responsibility for online extension of, for instance, a documentary film; and enable the rest of the production team to focus on their craft and the art of producing the particular film. In Estonia, where we have been involved with starting new Crossmedia Production study programs in the local film school (Baltic Film and Media School), it is noticeable how the graduates of the program, their work and projects, tend to have a relaxing effect on the cautious resistance to transmedia by the older segments of the local AV industry. Therefore, the resistance of one social group (its auto-communicative self-assurance) to the general processes of media convergence results in the divergence or pluralization of artistic professions. That is, auto-communication in a complex environment has resulted in dialogic practices within the convergent industries that have, in effect, generated more heterogeneity in terms of its production cultures. Convergence has conditioned divergence to ease its effects. This characterizes the complexities of cultural evolution in Lotman's terms and illustrates the multidimensionality of transmedia evolution.

### **Industry Asymmetries**

The transmedia discourse often emphasizes certain potential for the empowerment of smaller companies. A typical optimistic industry narrative (for instance Pratten, 2011, p. 84) stresses the possibility for micro-companies to develop a project from scratch, by building direct and independent relationships with audiences (increasingly referred to as followers) and exploiting these relationships to acquire funding, either directly from the followers in the form of crowdfunding or by using them as an

asset when negotiating with either investors, sponsors, government funds, distributors, or other intermediaries. The expectation that these discourses typically articulate is that, in the case of independent transmedia projects, the community building, financing, exhibition and fundraising should work in concert with the potential for projects to eventually become self-funding. Pratten (2011), for instance, suggests a sequence of initiatives that may start with a filmmaker using his/her own money to produce low-cost introductory content (teaser/trailer/etc.) that could then be used to build an early audience that, in turn, could participate in viral marketing and crowd-funding of a more advanced trailer or a pilot. The latter could be used to attract more substantial industry investment and to reach new followers.

In conceptual terms, the core argument supporting the expectations for the empowerment of micro-sized independents is that turning a content brand platform agnostic and also getting it followed across platforms reduces their dependence on any of the individual platform owners and, therefore, increases the bargaining power of the content owners. The expectation is that with transmedia content the control over distribution is, for the first time, in the hands of content owners (Feldmann, 2005, p. 181). However, our studies (Ibrus, 2012) indicate that often the first attempts at this may be rather frustrating for the small independents. Relying on the available publishing platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook or iTunes, it is increasingly difficult to make their projects visible in the saturated Internet of the "attention economy" (Goldhaber, 1997) era. Larger brands or companies that control assets across media boundaries (for instance, own TV channels, newspapers, online portals, etc.) have secured revenue streams that enable them to invest on a long-term basis in marketing or innovations on newer platforms. As argued by Bechmann (2012, p. 903), the innovations in the digital domain can, in fact, only assert themselves as cross-platform business models because the old platforms secure an established revenue model while new initiatives on digital platforms are tested on the basis of the free model.

The independent micro-companies without such additional revenue streams and without control over multiple platforms may, however, find themselves disadvantaged. This was demonstrated by Ibrus (2012) as he studied a set of small audiovisual content producers who were experimenting with transmedia projects and learned that instead of the expected increase in bargaining power for these companies, the reality was somewhat more ambiguous—that it is a challenge to make a small transmedia project visible in the crowded Internet. Eventually they decided that in the future they would attach their transmedia projects to established media brands, to ease the marketing effort, as well as to increase the limits to budgets. In this context, it is important to recall that the term crossmedia (a more general term that also covers the instances of transmedia storytelling) is often also used to refer to concentrated and oligopolistic media markets, where the connections between media outlets and platforms may be strictly controlled by only a few large enterprises (e.g., Congdon, Graham, Green, & Robinson, 1995). The existing studies on cross-platform business modeling and transmedia practice may be understood to suggest that these emergent phenomena may indeed be enforcing the path dependencies of the oligopolistic market structures.

Still, as demonstrated by Doyle (2010, p. 445) the situation is also challenging for larger cross-platform players. She emphasizes that the transition from a single-media to a multi-platform organization involves notable additional costs because audiences have come to expect ever more dedicated and

sophisticated transmedia tie-ins. Yet, meeting these demands can be expensive (Soun Chung, 2007). Production of interactive content is labor-intensive and presumes significant investments in specialist skills. As a result firms hire an ever-growing number of dedicated staff to produce and reproduce content for an increasing number of platforms, while only some of these will be successful in generating incremental revenues to a level that enables marginal costs to be covered. Both public and private media institutions face, therefore, various closely related challenges: the need for high levels of creative and financial investment in new media and cross-platform projects, generally limited returns from new platforms, and difficulties in evaluating the value generated by cross-platform strategies. Doyle (2010, p. 444) reports that a common strategic response to these challenges has been to focus on fewer, high-impact ideas. For instance, the major UK broadcasters, generally seen as drivers of multi-platform strategizing and experimentation with transmedia storytelling (Bennett et al., 2012), have adopted the “fewer, bigger, better” formula and acknowledge that output diversity must suffer to support the select projects with high-impact potential. Sørensen (2014) similarly describes how British TV channels focus on promoting content and not just TV programs yet paradoxically only a small set of their high-profile projects are heavily marketed across platforms. Also, the early results of our own yet unfinished study at Estonia’s PSB Eesti Rahvusringhääling (ERR; study is based on interviews with respondents from all its subdivisions) indicates that it is only the high-profile media events (Olympics, Eurovision Song Contest, etc.) or prime-time infotainment programs that have received dedicated funds for developing unique cross-platform solutions or formats. In relation to such tendencies, Murray (2005) has posited that multi-platform distribution encourages “market ubiquity of a limited number of franchises.” It is for these reasons that transmedia emergence could be interpreted as contributing toward standardization around safe and popular themes and brands—in practice resulting in less from more, rather than more for less (Doyle, 2010, p. 446).

### **Limited Endurances of Projects**

Another important perspective often associated with multi-platform storytelling is that platform agnosticism, together with intimate relationships with audiences, have the potential to generate multiple revenue streams for a content company and that in turn has the potential to establish lasting business operations and secure certain feasible futures for the particular company. This refers, more specifically, to the fact that transmedia is often related to the phenomenon of seriality in culture, which in turn is based on the culture industry’s strategy to cater to the established expectations of the audiences. The new platform’s agnostic relationships with fans and other dedicated audiences also brings along the possibility of catering for their dedication on various media platforms, as well as in different media formats or modalities. This would mean new narrative developments and extensions on multiple platforms that are developed for/in dialogue with dedicated followers, over time, as the new needs of audiences are articulated and identified. The standard expectation within the industry is to provide a mix of free and premium content. However, this suggests that transmedia as a cultural phenomenon could be interpreted as a network-era risk-management technique of media industries, to deal with audience uncertainties about unfamiliar content, together with the resulting market uncertainties (Aarseth, 2006).

What matters here is that the increased bargaining power, together with the potential for serial productions of certain narrative/intellectual property derivatives, has the potential to secure longer-term

stability for independent producers. As such, transmedia could empower micro-companies; these companies that traditionally always used to apply for resources from external public funding schemes could now build on their intellectual properties and generate new revenue streams and autonomous income.

Yet currently such a prospect is often challenged. As referred to above, in Europe it is the PSBs that drive the experimentation with transmedia storytelling. They tend to fund 100% of multi-platform work on any given commission and, therefore, usually retain all the rights. To explain the implications of this for the endurance of transmedia projects, we should start by explaining the organizational and status differences between those independents that produce AV content and those that are responsible for interactive content formats. For structural reasons, including the audience contact that the different outlets have, it is the TV that comes first for the PSBs, and therefore, multi-platform commissions are often bolted on to a television program. This may lead to a situation where the independent digital agencies that take care of the transmedia extensions of the TV program are placed at the end of the value chain and are less able to truly influence or lead the evolution of the multi-platform public service content forms (Bennett et al., 2012, p. 34). The additional barriers to successful multi-platform production are understood to stem from the commissioning structures of the PSBs, the lack of clear and shared metrics for multi-platform, and the different business models employed by digital and television production companies.

The challenge related to commissioning structures is that television programs and digital content are often commissioned separately by different units. However, the order of conduct is such that the TV program is generally decided on first and transmedia extensions later, when the TV program is already in production. This makes TV companies predominantly responsible for the supply of ideas into the PSBs, and digital content companies are simply hired to execute the existing ideas. As a result, there is a divide between television's IP-based business and digital content companies' work-for-hire model, which eventually reinforces the position of the digital agencies at the end of the value chain, also making it difficult for the latter to influence their TV counterparts. Therefore, TV-related transmedia projects are often produced by "forced marriages," where digital and television companies work in relative isolation and with no clear understanding of each other's working practices or expectations. This problem, however, has been increasingly recognized by several European PSBs, sometimes resulting in the further integration of TV and online commissioning teams. As of now, however, almost all independent production of interactive transmedia content for PSB is based on a work-for-hire model—responding to tenders and charging a day-rate fee. Bennett et al. (2012) report that as a result there is a lack of development culture in the digital content industries. Due to the lack of relevant teams in their organizations, digital agencies rarely develop original ideas and pitch them to broadcasters. The rationale behind this is that, as the digital independents seldom get their hands on IP rights, there is a motivational aspect lacking to start developing original content and solutions.

It should be emphasized that this does not only hold for the digital agencies but also linear AV content companies. PSBs in Europe do not normally have a tradition of ceding copyrights to independent producers. The downside of this arrangement is that such locking up of digital rights may lead to a situation where PSBs and independents both fail to benefit from any possible further exploitation of IP.

The television-centric operations of PSBs have the effect that all commissioning continues to follow the logic of TV seasons and that TV programs need to be updated, even if some shows have been performing well in terms of ratings. Hence, sooner or later a particular intellectual property is written off the program, but the associated rights are still kept. Independent producers in the United Kingdom tend to be frustrated about the fact that the commissioned IP is often left unexploited in this way. They argue that, if the rights were to stay with the producer, these could be turned into longer-term projects, enabling not only steady revenue streams for these producers but also much longer evolutionary cycles for the particular transmedia projects. There is a sentiment in UK multi-platform industries that the value of rights and, therefore, the true business potential of transmedia projects, will not be fully understood or exploited until the rights are put in the hands of digital producers. Our own uncompleted study that we have been conducting from 2013–2014 at Estonia's public broadcaster, ERR, and at a small set of independent producers cooperating with ERR (qualitative study based on interviews with respondents from these organizations) confirmed the same sentiment also existed among the independent producers in this small country. For instance, a producer of ERR's internationally recognized "gamified" science show (*Rakett 69*, which was elected by the European Broadcasting Union as the best educational TV show in Europe in spring 2012) admitted that the production company would be motivated to invest in the show having more dynamic and autonomous life on the Internet if only they were able to retain some of the rights. That is, the producers, both in the United Kingdom and Estonia, indicated that, in exchange for retaining rights and making money further down the line, the production companies would be ready to accept more risk. Nevertheless, there is currently a lack of standard terms on rights sharing between PSBs and independents. As admitted by the executives of the ERR, their current public service remit does not allow them to pass on any of the rights. Therefore, legal protection is likely to remain a barrier to the establishment of an IP-based model for independents in regard to multi-platform public service productions, with the balance of power in favor of the broadcasters. This, of course, has implications for media plurality and adds to the doubt as to whether transmedia emergence has any significant positive effect on the latter.

### Conclusion

In this article, we built on the semiotics of culture approach and demonstrated, in conceptual terms, that as the practices of transmedia storytelling are becoming mainstream, these could facilitate intensified and widespread processes of inter-semiotic translation at all levels of cultures. Such translations could be understood as the basic mechanisms that cater to cultures with new meanings, texts, and languages. We proposed that transmedia as an emergent practice may be interpreted as valuable for advancing societal dialogues and enriching the culture with new socially pertinent representations (i.e., facilitating cultural heterogeneity that is needed for sustainable development). We pointed also to the transmedia-related expectations about economic opportunities for the AV industry's small independents; that internet-based distribution lowers market entry barriers, that platform-agnostic content brands increase their creators' bargaining powers, and that direct relationships in turn create opportunities for long-term business operations and revenue streams. These expectations of economic opportunities for small independents, as well as for the macro-level cultural dynamics, may be mutually conditioning: an increase in the numbers of autonomous agents contributing to transmedial border-

crossings in a culture is expected to positively influence dialogism and heterogeneity in the particular culture.

In contrast to such expectations, in the remainder of the article, we reviewed several of the recent empirical studies of transmedia production processes, both by ourselves and our colleagues. We highlighted structural factors that limit the potential of transmedia to be unleashed and fully exploited by various industry agents, especially the smaller ones. First, the ongoing changes and transmedia emergence in Europe's smaller countries, as perceived from the perspective of established film industries, is often not organic and endogenously emerging from the internal dynamics within these industries or from their autonomously motivated dialogues with the Internet industries. Instead, the change is perceived as exogenous—coming from outside—effected by much larger and powerful subsystems of cultural governance readjusting themselves for the neo-liberal order of policy making. All over Europe the former rationales of cultural policies are retreating, and new logics of creative industry management are gaining ground. The latter includes expectations for improving the economic indicators and eventual scalable growth in the content sector that also includes the film industries. These expectations often derive from associations with the start-up culture in software industries. Such associations result eventually with rationales to combine the two (i.e., this is where transmedia enters the picture). In the discourses of the creative industries' policy makers, transmedia refers to an area of innovation, where the strengths of AV entertainment and software industries could be combined and the combination would result in their synergetic growth that is expected to spill over to the general economic advancement in the particular city/region/country.

To encourage such cooperation and development, various new support schemes have been set up that either fund training activities, the actual production of experimental transmedia projects, or joint cluster facilities for the ICT and AV sector companies. The existence of such funds becomes, however, often an important stimulus for the generally underfunded film sector. Yet these can also become a source of new frustrations and tensions, since most industry professionals do not have the skills needed or even an understanding of the new opportunities. This challenge is being increasingly dealt with by the establishment of new higher education programs or other training opportunities, with the aim of educating a new breed of professionals, those that will take care of the developing multi-platform strategies for media projects. Therefore, the media convergence as a complex and multi-linear process is in this particular context expressed as divergence (i.e., the emergence of new kinds of professionals next to older ones).

It is, however, paradoxical that although the creative industries' policies presuppose growth in the sector, especially occasional scalable growth among start-up companies and assume that this growth can be achieved by external support for these start-ups, it may be difficult to attain because structural limits within the industry and its codes of conduct. Our article summarizes the recent studies that demonstrate that the market dynamics in the area of transmedial media and communications are still shaped by the classical drift of media markets toward oligopolistic structures. What is more, in the Internet era, such predisposition is enforced by the logic of positive network externalities (Liebowitz & Margolis, 1994). That is, for small content companies, the breakthroughs in the transmedia era do not necessarily make things any easier than before. This realization has negative implications for the potential

increase in plurality in culture; fewer agents also mean less dialogism and enriching translations between the culture's subsystems.

Furthermore, the bigger players, including PSBs, have learned lessons about the cost-effectiveness of multi-platform productions (high costs are not necessarily reflected in audience numbers), and they take care to produce only small numbers of blockbuster products—heavily marketed content brands. This again undermines the potential for contemporary transmedia practices to contribute positively to wider cultural dynamics. In addition, there is the current practice of PSBs (who are the main commissioners of transmedia content in Europe) to keep the intellectual property rights for content that they themselves would not exploit. This limits the possibilities of independent content providers to have autonomous operations, together with their ability to contribute to wider cultural dynamics with their transmedia projects.

Our overall conclusion: although the dialogic dynamics within media and societies have facilitated the emergence of innovations that in turn have created opportunities for new creative practices that include transmedial communications, many power asymmetries still persist (and new ones are created) because effective auto-communicative actions and other self-sustenance activities by the dominant fractions of media systems. Lotman's theory suggests a paradox that culture evolves, in parallel, both centrifugally and centripetally (i.e., toward conflicting but mutually conditioning directions), in that the first direction generates heterogeneity and the other homogeneity, whereas the general tendency to verge toward one depends on the realization that the other did not seem to work. In this article we demonstrated that the evolution of transmedia practices is similarly bidirectional—transmedia not only has great potential, but has at many instances contributed usefully toward increased dialogism and the production of cultural heterogeneities. Yet we also demonstrated reactions to this heterogeneity that have eventually turned media systems to refocus and to produce "more from less" (i.e., to contribute toward the production of homogeneity in media culture). Since there were also other structural limitations to the fulfillment of transmedia potential, the question for further transmedia research and associated policy design in Europe is, therefore, how to arrive at a new appropriated balance and a policy design that would facilitate feasible dialogism and openness to innovation by all.

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