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The Influence of Transmedia Storytelling Portfolio Examples on Employer Perceptions of Public Relations Graduate Employability – A Pilot Study

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Abstract

Transmedia storytelling is the process of telling stories in an integrated fashion across multiple platforms, traditional and new (Jenkins, 2010). This paper suggests that public relations graduates who include transmedia storytelling examples in their portfolios are considered by hiring managers as displaying greater employability than graduates without them. This finding encourages public relations educators to assess current pedagogy to explore how it approaches the practice of transmedia storytelling. Additionally, educators are encouraged to ascertain whether current curriculum provides ample opportunities for students to develop transmedia storytelling examples as portfolio inclusions for perusal by prospective employers.

Keywords: public relations pedagogy, transmedia storytelling, portfolios, e-portfolios, graduate employability
Introduction

Storytelling is considered a powerful tool for public relations practitioners to build positive relationships between stakeholders and organisations (Dowling, 2006; Gill, 2011; Heath & Palenchar, 2009). As Warren, Wakefield and Mills (2013, p. 68) suggest, ‘... we often remember stories uniquely and they have impact on us and evoke lasting emotional responses.’ The practice has been identified as vital in assisting an organisation to meet its business objectives by inspiring and persuading its stakeholders (McKee, 2003). Its capability to fulfill ‘... interests of management or as a vehicle for organizational renewal and participation’ has also been highlighted, rendering storytelling as a permanent and necessary item in the communications arsenal for public relations professionals (Boyce, 1996, p. 21). However, while using the tactic of storytelling to implement message delivery strategies that underpin the achievement of communication objectives, the continually rapid increase in communications channels, such as those associated with social media, requires public relations practitioners to tell stories in an integrated fashion across multiple platforms, traditional and new; a practice also known as ‘transmedia storytelling’ (Jenkins, 2010). Or as Warren et al (2013, p. 80) describes it: ‘... a single adventure across many forms of media …’.

Public relations professionals must have a thorough understanding of the storytelling process, including each new and traditional communication technology. This environment has been described by Warren et al (2013) as almost ubiquitously media convergent and dependent on the integration of each communications platform if storytelling is to operate as an effective tool in practice. However, this expectation of how well public relations professionals must function as transmedia storytellers in this quickly evolving environment also casts question on how well public relations educators are equipping students with the skills necessary to work in the industry upon graduation and beyond. If current public relations practitioners are expected by prospective employers to have a firm grasp of transmedia storytelling as a practice, this expectation would also logically extend to graduates. This notion was confirmed by a study undertaken by Barker and Sutherland (2013) that indicated transmedia storytelling skills were looked upon favorably by a group of prospective employers in the public relations industry. How well public relations graduates are equipped to function in this evolving environment casts question on current public relations pedagogy and the expectations of prospective employers in terms of providing students with the ability to develop and implement effective communication strategies.

Similarly, Ccabel (2011) has suggested that it is essential to include content on technological convergence as part of general curriculum to
ensure that school students are technically savvy and able to stay aware of new developments. This notion of keeping abreast of technological developments, such as convergence and the related concept of transmedia storytelling, seems to have even greater relevance for public relations students who must use these technologies and techniques to function as professional communicators once entering the workforce. In the current competitive employment climate (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2014) with prospective employers seeking staff who can proficiently navigate between communications channels, traditional and new, the possession of tangible examples of work that demonstrate writing skills and the ability to think across platforms would be highly beneficial for public relations graduates.

Currently, a void of literature exists relating to the transmedia storytelling knowledge and skills desired by employers of recent public relations graduates including their attitudes surrounding displaying such knowledge in a portfolio. A further research gap is apparent with regard to transmedia storytelling pedagogy in a public relations context, and particularly with studies that encompass how public relations educators teach students how to develop transmedia storytelling examples to be showcased in a portfolio or e-portfolio. This paper explores the attitudes of industry professionals regarding whether transmedia storytelling examples in public relations graduates’ portfolios have an influence on perceived graduate employability. The aim of this research is to first ascertain how well regarded an employer in the public relations industry would deem a graduate who displayed an aptitude for transmedia storytelling in their portfolio. With the findings of this study, a more extensive line of enquiry can be implemented with the ambition of informing public relations educators to develop relevant pedagogy (if necessary) and advising students of how they can best present themselves and their skills to a prospective employer.

**Literature review**

**Transmedia storytelling**

It is vital for public relations educators to have a sound knowledge of transmedia storytelling theory to properly guide students and graduates in how to demonstrate its application in portfolio form. Henry Jenkins (2006) first described the concept of transmedia storytelling in *Convergence Culture* to detail an emerging trend in entertainment content development. Jenkins (2010) noted that the process involves the relaying of a narrative using multiple channels in an integrated way with each channel contributing its own individual addition to the overall story, also utilising social media to encourage interaction, participation and contribution to the story by the
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Tenderich (2013) has explained the relevance of Jenkins’ theory in a marketing communication context suggesting that brands can develop integrative narrative and communicate across multiple media platforms, each contributing its own distinctive influence. Scolari (2009) has offered a similar perspective on the application of transmedia storytelling within the confines of brand management. The significance of this particular literature is that it displays how the concept of transmedia storytelling can apply to other industries, thus, it can also be applied to public relations contexts.

Public relations researchers are yet to undertake in-depth research into transmedia storytelling as a concept within the discipline or industry. However, the importance of storytelling in public relations practice as a tool to build and maintain relationships and reputation has been identified in the literature. Bhurji (2012) suggests that as the lines between advertising and public relations are blurring, public relations practitioners need to understand the broader marketing and media landscape to use storytelling as a way to meet organisational goals. Dowling (2006) states that storytelling can assist with building a positive reputation if the stakeholders embracing them deem their mission to be valued and their morality and behaviour to be good. Gill (2011, p. 13) writes that ‘deeper engagement’ can be a benefit of utilising corporate storytelling to communicate with stakeholders.

Public relations and graduate employability

Furthermore, it may helpful to public relations educators, students and graduates to understand the skills that employers seek so that they can be illustrated as portfolio examples. A pilot study by Barker and Sutherland (2013) indicates that transmedia storytelling has been employed by a group of Australian practitioners and that the skills required to develop such tactics are highly regarded by employers. Paskin (2013) found that traditional public relations skills, such as writing, are of greater importance to prospective employers than organisational social media skills, even though this form of technical proficiency is becoming increasingly sought by the industry. Paskin (2013) suggests that it is important for public relations graduates to not only have a broad knowledge and skill set, but possess the aptitude and motivation to be able to continue to build their skill sets after graduation. This research also emphasised how vital it is for public relations educators to teach students both the traditional and new in terms of communications channels to keep them abreast of trends of technological convergence within the industry (Paskin, 2013). While both of these studies explored expectations of graduate employability in terms of traditional and more technologically advanced knowledge and skills, they did not investigate exactly how stories should be communicated in an integrated fashion across traditional and new media. Additionally, both
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Studies did not provide advice on how public relations graduates can present this knowledge in a portfolio, which indicates an opportunity to fill this gap in the research.

Transmedia storytelling and portfolios in public relations pedagogy

It should also be noted there is a scarcity of literature in relation to portfolio development as part of public relations pedagogy in general. This is a phenomenon not experienced by many other disciplines ranging from teacher education (Stroble, 1995; Ketter & Pool, 1997) and physical education (Kan, 2007) to mathematics (Burks, 2010). However, the focus of these studies tends to evaluate portfolios within pedagogy as an assessment tool rather than a device to demonstrate skills and knowledge to a prospective employer. Similarly, while there are limited studies to draw on in relation to transmedia storytelling in public relations pedagogy, a few studies involving other disciplines have been conducted. Warren et al. (2013) documented how a professor introduced transmedia to help support the learning of a class of graduate students, who then used this knowledge to develop lessons for a sixth grade Social Studies class on topics such as the Holocaust. In this instance, the subject was approached generally and the topic of portfolios was not raised.

Jenkins (2010) has documented his experiences when teaching transmedia storytelling to media students and concluded that using both theory and practice to teach the concept to students is fundamental to understanding transmedia storytelling and how it can be undertaken effectively in practice. To do this, Jenkins (2010) advises educators to involve practitioners from industry to explain how transmedia storytelling actually works and the processes involved in executing it successfully. However, again, the issue of portfolios was not explored. Alexander (2004) confirms the necessity of both theoretical and practical knowledge by suggesting that public relations educators must possess a thorough understanding of new technology use in order to properly facilitate ‘hands on’ learning. However, it can be argued there is more to the achievement of digital literacy than skills-based learning. To complement this idea, Buckingham (2006) writes that digital literacy should extend beyond knowledge of how to use the tools, but should also encompass a critical understanding of the effects of new media technologies technologies. In the context of this paper, the combination of transmedia examples in a public relations graduate’s portfolio (or e-portfolio) is capable of indicating digital literacy levels and expertise to a prospective employer, therefore, it an area requiring attention from both educators and students.
Validity of graduate portfolios

A portfolio is defined as a collection of work that showcases students’ skills, understanding and achievements (Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991; Todd, 2009). The perceived benefits and the necessity for technological and real world examples are key themes present in the literature focusing on student portfolios, and in particular, those of public relations students. Wolf (2008), Benigni, Cheng and Cameron (2004) and Sterkel Powell and Jankovich (1998) agree that portfolios provide graduates with tangible tools to assist them in gaining employment. Benigni et al (2004, p. 259) describes portfolios as, ‘... tangible recruiting tools for internship and/or career opportunities.’ Lowrey and Becker (2001) and Benigni et al (2004) highlight the importance of providing evidence of technological aptitude as part of a portfolio. In terms of the display of technological aptitude, although this stage of the study is quite broad in its field of enquiry, it is imperative to mention the concept or e-portfolios at it encompasses the technological aspect of transmedia storytelling and suggests a possible way in which such examples may be presented to a prospective employer. Barrett (2001) defines an e-portfolio as, ‘... the compilation of portfolio items stored in electronic formats such as audio-visual, graphical, or text.’

There is a wealth of literature exploring and assessing the validity of the e-portfolio as an assessment tool, but of most relevance to this study is the suggestion that an opportunity exists for portfolios of this type to be used as highly effective tools for graduates in gaining employment in their chosen fields post-graduation (Yu, 2012; Ward & Moser, 2008). Furthermore, the benefits of students including real world examples were supported by Wolf (2008) with Benigni et al (2004) and Swanson (2008) espousing the benefits of using examples from volunteering activities, such as those gained through ‘Service Learning’. Service Learning is ‘... a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities designed to promote student learning and development’ (Jacoby, 1996, p. 5) and is seen as highly beneficial for students, as Benigni et al (2004, p. 262) suggests by providing them with ‘... a forum to build professionalism, but only if the emphasis of learning is equal or greater to the notion of service.’ Examples of Service Learning may include internships or Work Integrated Learning undertaken at nonprofit organisations such as charities or other organisations servicing the community. Therefore, while there has been a considerable amount of research conducted on the concept of portfolios in its various functions and forms, a scarcity of literature exists in the area of transmedia storytelling portfolios, signifying an opportunity to address this need with this particular study.
Research question

1. Do prospective employers perceive examples of completed transmedia storytelling projects in a recent graduate’s portfolio as an advantage when considering them for a position?

Method

The research question explored in this paper forms part of a larger pilot study into employer expectations of public relations graduates’ transmedia storytelling proficiency. The aim of the study is to explore and expose meaning; therefore, qualitative research was deemed the most appropriate method to achieve this (Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano & Morales, 2007; Lindlof and Taylor, 2002). The researchers used purposive and convenience sampling (Creswell, 2007) to conduct 15 semi-structured phone interviews, a method supported by the works of Minichiello, Aroni and Hays (2008) and Denzin and Lincoln (2008) as both appropriate and conducive to qualitative research, with public relations professionals throughout two weeks in early 2013. The sampling methods employed in this study were selected due to time constraints. The Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee granted approval for the study. Participants read an Explanatory Statement prior to the interview and were informed that their involvement in the project was voluntary and confidential. The study was primarily a Victorian study as this was where the researchers reside and had the greatest number of contacts. However, some practitioners participating in the interviews were located in three other Australian states. Overall, the geographical spread of the participants was as follows: Victoria (12), New South Wales (1), Queensland (1) and Western Australia (1). In terms of the industry sectors represented, participants originated from a range of five organisational categories. There were: public relations agencies (5), not-for-profit (4), corporate (2), education (2) and government (1). In relation to the professional background of participants, all were senior public relations professionals involved in the recruitment of public relations graduates. Interviews were digitally recorded and the researchers transcribed data before employing a patterning coding process (Weerakkody, 2009).

Findings

There was a unanimously positive response by all 15 respondents when the researchers asked whether public relations graduates who provided examples of transmedia storytelling as part of their portfolios would be at an advantage when being considered for a position. Most participants indicated that if a recent graduate included transmedia storytelling examples in their portfolio it would actually ‘set them apart’ from other job
seekers and indicated that this is not an action commonly taken by recent graduate level candidates they have interviewed. Another common theme emerged to suggest that participants believed including examples of completed transmedia storytelling projects in a portfolio of work revealed to them that a public relations graduate possessed three distinctive characteristics. The first is the ability to write across media, displaying a proficiency to communicate via traditional and new media platforms. Secondly, including transmedia portfolio examples was identified as displaying technical competence on behalf of the student by illustrating that they not only know how to write content for new media platforms such as social media, but that they also understand the mechanics of how to use them. Finally, participants suggested that as the inclusion of transmedia storytelling examples in the portfolios of public relations graduates is currently a rarity, graduates displaying the forethought to include evidence of their understanding of this contemporary public relations practice would also be deemed as demonstrating advanced levels of initiative.

PR graduates need to show that they understand PR in the 21st Century. They need to show that they understand content development and integration and how to tell stories across different mediums. (Senior Executive, Multinational PR Agency)

I think it gives me something tangible. Rather than them saying that they can do it or they think they can do it. It gives me or the organisation a better chance to assess that person. What it also does is helps when comparing a graduate against somebody that has been in the workforce, the person who has been in the workforce may already have that advantage, so I do see it as an advantage in a candidate’s application, but it wouldn’t make or break it necessarily. (Communications Director, Education Sector)

As indicated above, while the entire sample agreed that transmedia storytelling examples would be an advantage for public relations graduates entering the workforce, none suggested that they would employ a graduate based solely on their portfolio. Two of the respondents commented specifically about the necessity for graduates to display an aptitude for writing across a range of platforms so that they could ‘hit the ground running’ when they joined their respective organisations. Furthermore, transmedia storytelling examples gained through a Service Learning experience were also identified by some of the participants in this study as a favourable inclusion in a public relations graduate’s portfolio.
The hands-on stuff is really important. A great way to do this is through a volunteer activity. That would be very impressive to me. (Marketing & Communications Manager, Not-for-Profit Sector)

The principal reason why we gave our Communication Officer the role was that, even though she didn't have much employment experience per se, she had completed an internship with [a global NGO]. It was her work from that that we were able to see. It was clear that she had a good grasp and understood those platforms and had the skills. (Global Campaign Manager, Not-for-Profit Sector)

The consensus displayed by the sample in this study suggests that practical evidence of transmedia storytelling skills would be an advantage for public relations graduates to include in their portfolio to present to prospective employers when seeking career opportunities within the industry. Furthermore, authentic transmedia portfolio examples gained through Service Learning experiences would be most highly regarded, a finding that confirmed those of Benigni et al (2004).

Discussion

The findings from this study raise a number of questions and areas of discussion for public relations educators in relation to contemporary public relations pedagogy. Firstly, it is important to understand how current curriculum is addressing the practice of transmedia storytelling within the public relations discipline. Effective transmedia storytelling involves each communications platform providing its own unique contribution to the overall story as well as the audience participation in the form of co-created content (Warren et al, 2013). Are we adequately teaching students about storytelling in the first instance and then how to express a narrative using the best combination of communications platforms to create the most meaning and participation with the stakeholders with which it is trying to engage? To do this, public relations curriculum needs to continue to teach students about traditional communications channels employed by the industry. However, it must also create digitally literate students by providing them with an understanding of the technical aspects of each platform (traditional and new) and how to then use this knowledge to write and refashion content to tell a story; one that adds to the overall narrative and aids in meeting campaign or organisational objectives.

However, the inclusion of extensive theoretical and practical aspects of transmedia storytelling in contemporary public relations pedagogy may prove to be challenging, especially for educators within the Higher
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Education sector where the process of changing curriculum can be a long and arduous one (Norton, 2012). This does not bode well for public relations educators trying to keep abreast of rapidly changing technologies and techniques being used by professionals within the industry. It is important to ascertain how well current public relations pedagogy is preparing students in becoming effective public relations practitioners when entering the industry after graduation (Kinnick & Cameron, 1994). Should university degrees in public relations be designed around the skills expected from industry and if so, with the challenge of lengthy processes as barriers, is this something that could ever be fully realised? Including portfolio (or e-portfolio) development within current public relations pedagogy could be extremely beneficial for public relations students. Portfolio creation could be a highly valuable skill that public relations graduates can utilise in selecting and assembling their best work to showcase to prospective employers. Moreover, this skill may also assist public relations graduates throughout their careers if they are required to present the advancement of their expertise if applying for more senior roles.

Furthermore, as this study confirmed, the prospective employers in this study consider graduates with transmedia storytelling portfolio examples at an advantage when attempting to enter the industry. However, it is important for public relations educators to examine whether they are providing students with opportunities to develop such examples, and if not, if it is feasible for them to begin doing so. Firstly, how much emphasis is placed on public relations students to develop quality pieces for inclusion in a portfolio that is ready for when they graduate and how can educators either provide or expose students to opportunities where transmedia storytelling examples can prominently feature? If public relations educators cannot provide opportunities for students it may be more achievable for them to inform and guide students in how to create their own, especially through Service Learning. The findings in this study confirmed the work of Benigni et al (2004) and Swanson (2008) in relation to the value of Service Learning. If such experiences cannot be incorporated into official public relations curriculum, educators could guide students to invent their own opportunities through existing University volunteering programs or through their own personal outreach activities with non-profit organisations, local or otherwise.

Limitations

There were a number of limitations in this particular study. Firstly, the sample size (15) was small which only provided a narrow snapshot of professional opinion from industry in relation to this topic of enquiry. The methods of selecting the sample (purposive and convenience) resulted in limitations in terms of industry and geographical representation. As the
researchers predominantly used participants from their own pool of industry contacts, this limited the variety of the sample to those agreeing to participate being from locations and sectors that they had come into contact within their professional lives. Using an alternative method to involve a greater pool of hiring managers would assist with this limitation. The brief line of questioning in terms of transmedia storytelling examples in a portfolio also presented a further limitation. Participants were asked whether such examples would put a public relations graduate at an advantage, but did not delve deeper as to what it would actually consist of, what would be most impressive and what their expectations would be in terms of the way in which such examples would be presented, specifically in relation to e-portfolio formats. These are areas where further investigation is required.

Further research

Further research is necessary to expand this pilot study to include a much larger sample with greater geographical and industry sector representation along with further in-depth questioning on the nature of desirable transmedia storytelling portfolio examples. The term ‘transmedia storytelling portfolio examples’ is a broad definition, therefore, it is essential that further research focuses on how employers articulate what such examples mean to them. It may prove to be beneficial for public relations educators and graduates to understand exactly which examples (communications channels and which combinations of each) are deemed as the most impressive to prospective employers in order for graduate portfolios to have the greatest impact when seeking employment. This may assist and inform educators to shape pedagogy to provide graduates with the best possible advice and skills to channel into their portfolios before attempting to enter the workforce upon graduation. Furthermore, it is also necessary to explore the validity of e-portfolios as an option in presenting transmedia storytelling examples. The challenges here, as previously mentioned, will be the rapid evolution of new media communications platforms and the generally slow processes in tertiary institutions that must be followed in order to make any significant changes to curriculum. Further research also needs to focus on gauging exactly how well current curriculum is aligning with technology and the needs of industry (Wright & Hinson, 2008; Coombs & Rybacki, 1999) to ensure that transmedia storytelling skills are vital inclusions.

Conclusion

Current literature suggests that transmedia storytelling is a viable public relations tactic to build reputation (Dowling, 2006) and a skill considered favourably by employers of public relations graduates (Barker & Sutherland, 2013). Therefore, it is important to understand how well current
pedagogy is preparing public relations graduates (Wang, 2004) in terms of necessary transmedia storytelling knowledge and the frequency in which public relations students are exposed to practical opportunities to build portfolios that showcase their transmedia storytelling skills, in turn providing them with a competitive advantage when entering the workforce. Incorporating transmedia storytelling into current public relations pedagogy may be challenging due to the opposition between the speed of change processes required by university administration versus technological change. However, there are strategies in which educators can guide students on how to include such examples in their portfolios in order to present themselves as highly employable when endeavouring to enter the industry after graduation. As this is a pilot study, it is essential to understand what gaps exist between employer expectation and current pedagogy before public relations educators can accurately provide students with the information that they will find most valuable to them when entering the industry upon graduation. However, this study confirmed that graduates showcasing transmedia storytelling skills in a portfolio would be at an advantage over graduates who do not when vying against them for positions in the public relations profession.
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