

Transmedia Engagement in Transnational Television Distribution:

A Review of the Literature

Katherine Hoovestol

University of Georgia

Abstract

In recent years, television content providers have closely associated the term transnational with revolutionary. However, transnational consumption of televisual programming is not a phenomenon unique to the current era of platforms and streaming. This literature review examines the historical context of recent trends by beginning with a brief overview of the concept of transnational television in the United States, then focusing specifically on European transnationalism in the late twentieth century. Continuing with literature concerning the notion of the post-broadcast era, and the role of convergence culture in relation to new media, this paper concludes with a discussion of how transmedia and participatory culture changed the approach towards transnational/multinational storytelling.

Keywords: transnational television, digital distribution, streaming, broadcast, multidirectionality

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When considering the concept of transnational television, it is important to first differentiate this term from many of the other commonly associated buzzwords, such as global television and international markets. In his book *Netflix Nations*, Ramon Lobato describes *global television* as a service that maintains a presence in multiple international markets simultaneously and purposefully, whereas *transnational television* merely describes the tendency of televised content to travel outside of its country of origin (Lobato 2019). Operating with this definition, transnational television is not a concept unique to the world of streaming, rather stemming back to the original broadcast era of television.

The study of transnational broadcasting is relatively recent even when considered in the scope of television studies (Hilmes 2012). Michele Hilmes argues that the idea of broadcasting being intrinsically transnational (when the overall perception of its usage remains rooted in nationalism) is actually why broadcasting remains a focal point in transnational history. Hilmes describes the idea of “trans-national” as influences seen as foreign and therefore “non-national” and threatening to the idea of the nation state (Hilmes 2012, 13). Forgoing rhetoric behind the cultural aspect of transnationalism, Hilmes claims that the technology behind broadcasting influenced its ability to “*transgress* national borders” (emphasis in original) and bypass gatekeepers (2012, 2). This particular passage references radio as the precursor for television, but the idea behind broadcasting remains the same: simultaneous mass audiences, regardless of nationality.

Studying early television from an American perspective limits the conversation surrounding transnationalism within the confines of American nationalism, despite the geographical implications of transnational broadcast (Fickers & Johnson 2012). Even in the United States, there were instances of *signal spillover*, during which a nation accidentally receives broadcast from a bordering country (Lobato 2019). This was nothing compared to more densely populated continents such as Europe, whose countries' individual markets were constantly subject to spillover, to the point where most European citizens could choose which broadcast service they preferred to watch (Lobato 2019). This is not to imply that this was not problematic at times; Europe is a continent made up of many countries and nation states, with their own sense of nationalism and cultural baggage. As scholars such as Jean K. Chalaby discuss, it is not that there is a lesser sense of nationalism in Europe, rather that their sense of nationalism is always on a transnational scale (Chalaby 2009). In an American context, historians usually discuss spillover primarily of U.S. broadcast signal across the border into Mexico and Canada, not vice versa (Hilmes 2012).

Upon the introduction of satellite television, political problems reared their head as poor satellite transmission revealed national governments' unwillingness to provide equal access in areas thought to have been less profitable (Chalaby 2009). This opened the door for the EU to make strides towards actual transnational television, not without the same issues of cultural imperialism already discussed. This actually increased the success of local broadcasting channels, who were able to focus on hyper-localized content (Chalaby 2009). In *Transnational European Drama*, the authors describe how this hyper-localized content mixed with younger audiences craving more international content created the "perfect storm" for streaming to take

hold in Europe (Bondebjerg et al 2017, 52). As of today, streaming is merely an extension of the Americanization already present in the European media industry, albeit creating some opportunities for smaller independent productions to find success abroad (Bondebjerg et al 2017).

Most current transnational media historians agree that while the technology facilitating television delivery is relatively new, the idea of television transcending borders is not a new phenomenon (Lotz 2017b, Hilmes 2012). In his book *Television is the New Television*, Michael Wolff claims that “television has already shaped the future of digital media in its own image”, asserting that digital delivery has not actually changed our ideas of television or our consumption all that much (Wolff 2015). However, the fact remains that “TVIII” era is markedly different from years prior (Lotz 2017a). One side to the difference that remains understudied and underdeveloped (in comparison to the growing field of official international television, as detailed in Lobato’s *Netflix Nations*) is the role that transmedia and media convergence serve specifically in transnational consumption and distribution.

As discussed in an earlier article by Ramon Lobato, “Rethinking international TV research in the age of Netflix”, the model of Netflix (and many other major streaming companies) remains deeply related to earlier concepts of television, as well as intrinsically American (Lobato 2018). Transmedia, however, has made it easier for more independent (and non-American) productions to make digital stories relatively inexpensively, and distribute them on a global scale (Ibrus & Ojamaa 2014). The concept of transmedia, first defined by Jenkins in 2003, is not without its own misconceptions: some scholars consider transmedia to only include intentional dispersion of content across multiple media and platforms (Jenkins 2006, Evans

2011), while some consider adaptation to be a considerable part of transmedia (Ibrus & Ojamaa 2014). What is important to note, however, is how intertwined transmedia and participatory culture are with new media, a concept explored at length in Jenkins' *Convergence Culture*. Within the scope of transnational television, discussions regarding transnational transmedia are relatively limited.

Francesca Coppa details out the rise of the Internet fandom in the 1990s, but only briefly mentions the transnational capabilities of such high levels of fan engagement with far-reaching technology (Coppa 2006). Elizabeth Evans breaks down case studies of audience engagement, focusing on viewer agency and how that shifts the actual content of television (Evans 2011). Maria Immacolata Vasallo de Lopes discusses her case study of the fandom surrounding Brazilian telenovela *Passione*, speaking more to the engagement rather than the transnational travel of such fan engagement (Immacolata 2012).

In Sebnem Baran's short piece "Transnational flows, transmedia networks and limits of multidirectionality", he discusses not only the importance of transmedia and audience engagement, rather the potential application of such practices in furthering what he referred to as "multidirectionality" (Baran 2016). *Multidirectionality* is the concept of multiple countries sharing media with one another, rather than just one country distributing its content globally while working to suppress the reciprocation from other countries, a practice in which Baran implicated American streaming services, such as Netflix (Baran 2016). Multidirectionality, then, is key to achieving true transnational television, as opposed to initial fears of increased Americanization, as discussed at length in Hilmes' *Network Nations*.

One example of this in recent years, and analyzed in works of Gry C. Rustad and Steffen Krüger, is the distribution of the NRK's *Skam* (Shame 2015-2017). *Skam* implemented transmedia storytelling, crafting a cohesive narration on multiple digital platforms. Forgoing the traditional episode format, *Skam* released clips of varying lengths in real time, forcing fans to keep up with the show constantly (Krüger & Rustad 2019). Rustad credits the series with being one of the first web series to fully embrace the "logic of social media", creating a more personal viewing experience (Rustad 2018).

The truly unique part of *Skam*'s reception is its distribution outside of its home country of Norway. The NRK never officially released the series abroad, rather allowed the production team to focus on expanding the franchise outside of Norway by creating local versions of the series in France, Germany, Spain, and more (Krüger & Rustad 2019). The viewers actually took to translating the series and publishing the clips in a format that can be viewed in other countries. *Skam* quickly rose to international fame mainly on the Internet, using fan-oriented platforms such as Tumblr to keep up with the series all over the world (Krüger & Rustad 2019). Rustad credits this rise to *Skam*'s unique use of transmedia, and the sense of agency all of the viewers felt in their viewing experience.

Skam was not a foreign series made available through a streaming service, rather an independent production distributed entirely on the Internet by dedicated fans. A concept discussed by both Ramon Lobato and Amanda Lotz is the difference between *portals* and *platforms* when discussing Internet distribution. Streaming services such as Netflix are portals, meaning that they have content with very little user participation. Platforms, such as Tumblr, Twitter, etc, are driven by user participation in reaction to content (Lobato 2019). *Skam*

implemented platforms in addition to portals, and found success mainly on platforms in its transnational distribution (Krüger & Rustad 2018). This new media is what Chalaby refers to as “shaping media spaces with ‘built-in’ transnational connectivity” (2009, 243). When reconsidering Baran’s idea of multidirectionality, using these platforms and therefore implementing transmedia and fan engagement might be the next step in transnational television, and certainly warrants further research and study.

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