

## Article 1

# Transmedia Storytelling, Corporate Synergy, and Audience Expression

Leigh H. Edwards, Ph.D.  
Department of English  
Florida State University

## Keywords

Corporate Synergy; Transmedia Storytelling; Participatory Culture; New Media; Reality Television; Media Studies

## Abstract

This article argues that transmedia storytelling evidences competing trends, exemplifying corporate synergy on the one hand while allowing for audience-generated participatory culture on the other. The essay examines these competing dynamics as well as new developments in transmedia storytelling across multiple media platforms. It assesses how well recent media theory has accounted for these transmedia storytelling trends. It also analyzes key examples, which include online interactive reality television and crowdsourced music videos.

## Introduction

In assessing the current state of media conglomeration and corporate synergy, one key case study is the rise of multi-platform storytelling because it is a media trend that exemplifies corporate synergy. It is also important to examine the continuing development of related media practices such as crowdsourcing, mass customization, and user-generated content. All of these practices involve media production models that profit media conglomerates by coordinating among their different divisions, and they also entail monetizing how consumers try to interact with the media, turning fan behaviors into corporate profit, or seizing the democratic promise of new media for corporate gain. This analysis will address competing trends in multi-platform storytelling, from corporate branding to more audience-centered, creative uses of the media technology that allows for greater user access and agency. As I will demonstrate, while corporate branding dominates, and many transmedia texts reflect this dynamic, alternative practices are nevertheless present and proffer other potential uses of transmedia storytelling.

Multi-platform storytelling refers specifically to texts where content appears in a coordinated way across many different media formats (such as television, film, webisodes, mobile phone applications and mobisodes, games, books, graphic novels, and music albums) (Jenkins, 2006). For some popular Web content, audiences increasingly expect to see it directly linked to a broader array of media texts. These media formats have evolved in ways that speak to the cultural power of the Internet and to changing expectations of the entertainment content audiences seek there. The entertainment industry has new organizations and production models targeting this market. The Producer's Guild of American now recognizes transmedia producer as a category. A growing number of transmedia companies are appearing, often comprised of production units trying to generate transmedia content across film, games, TV, the Web, and mobile phones.

While multi-platform storytelling is not a new development, it is a booming media trend that reflects tendencies in the use of digital culture in the context of today's convergence culture. Convergence culture, in which old and new media systems interact in new ways and content flows across multiples media platforms, entails new media financing formats and cooperation between various media industries. Henry Jenkins (2006) notes that developments like digitization and new patterns of cross-media ownership beginning in the 1980s helped drive convergence culture, with media conglomerates moving to own interests across the industry, in film, television, popular music, computer games, Web

sites, toys, amusement park rides, books, newspapers, magazines, and comics.<sup>1</sup> Jenkins argues that convergence culture centrally involves dynamics that give greater agency and access to audiences, such as new interplay between producers and consumers, participatory fan culture, consumers becoming more active (seeking out entertainment they want across different media platforms), and new and unpredictable interactions between grassroots and corporate media. While he acknowledges that what he terms "transmedia storytelling" does involve corporate synergy, he insists that the more positive potential for fan expression and partial control is the more dominant dynamic in models such as "co-creation" between producers and consumers (Jenkins, 2006). While I would agree with Jenkins that there are some more audience-centered practices evident in some transmedia storytelling, which are promising developments from the point of view of benefitting audiences, I differ from him in arguing that the corporate branding dynamic is still a central part of the transmedia storytelling trend in ways that can be problematic.

Indeed, other scholars have critiqued how corporations have moved to monetize some of these trends. Jennifer Gillan (2011) has noted how television production companies are creating TV shows as a multi-platform network of texts by, in part, monetizing pre-existing fandom practices such as fan-centered websites (p. 2). Mark Andrejevic and others worry that developments like the rise of interactive media harness the democratic promise of the Internet for corporate profit and condition consumers to accept greater surveillance of them (in practices like mass customization marketing) and model neoliberal citizenship (Andrejevic, 2003, 2007a, 2007b; Ouelette & Hay, 2008). More generally, Eileen Meehan (2005) has demonstrated how corporate synergy, involving crosspromotion of media properties within media conglomerates (and their transindustrial structures) for maximum profit, can serve as a media conglomerate technique for controlling media markets through saturation. She details how this industry practice is driven by corporate profit motives, not audience interest, as the audiences-as-product are sold to advertisers and organized by demographics. In terms of corporate synergy and branding, Meehan (2005) notes that "the saturation of multiple markets with branded products means less air time, cable time, shelf space, and the like for nonbranded products" (p. 111). The increasing turn to transmedia storytelling in current media culture only amplifies these corporate branding practices.

For television specifically, companies have moved to incorporate new media developments, creating elements for their TV shows such as fan-centered websites, mobile phone applications, online games, and even music albums and tours, all imagined as features that help further the content. Gillan (2011) identifies two stages of TV development in terms of how networks have monetized fandom practices and mainstreamed them. In the 1990s, networks transformed TV series into platforms for promoting other media (like the "Dawson's Desktop" fan website for Dawson's Creek [1998-2003]). However, in the 2000s, new TV product is now conceptualized as a series of networked texts that prompt fans to track the content across multiple media platforms (like *Heroes* [2006-2010], which created a fan-centered website) (Gillan, 2011).

This multiplatform content is now central to what TV does and how it as an industry is trying to survive in the face of competition from other popular media platforms (like video games, social networking on the Web, content for smart phones, YouTube and other user-generated content websites, and even YouTube's sponsorship of professional channels designed to compete with television). Gillan (2011) argues that a model of multiplatform content also allows broadcast networks to target two audiences at once: the broader audience of the traditional broadcast platform, but now also the narrowcast audience of the multiplatform (smaller niche audiences who might, for example, play video games related to the TV series). Hence the TV industry has a new model of a combination "narrowcast-broadcast" TV series, and advertisers have embraced this model by participating in branded entertainment deals (Gillan, 2011, p. 2). This kind of model depends on attracting active fans who will become "brand advocates" who nurture fan networks, reposting content and links to their social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, etc.).

Examples of the rise in multi-platform texts include the Harry Potter franchise, which began as novels by J.K. Rowling, expanded into a film series, Web tie-ins, novelizations of the film versions, smart phone apps, and even a theme park (The Wizarding World of Harry Potter at Universal Orlando's Islands of Adventure). Again, the transmedia Potter text depends on active fans who will seek out, share that content, and also interact with it. Because of the highly active fan culture around the Potter franchise, and the large number of fan fiction websites, Rowling has created the Pottermore website to add more content

to her series and to provide a space for further fan interaction. A fascinating development in the Harry Potter fan culture is the existence of college Quidditch teams, comprised of fans who play the fictional Potter sport against other teams, both intramurally and intermurally, with players decked out in jerseys, wielding brooms, and living out their Potter universe fantasies. While the fan culture allows audiences spaces for their own creativity and interpretations (and fan and audience behavior cannot be predicted or controlled by producers), nevertheless, the multi-platform text is designed specifically to profit from and monetize fan behaviors.

A new development in terms of multi-platform storytelling involves fictional TV series that add a tied-in reality show, which becomes a way to incorporate fandom practices and profit from user-generated content. In *Glee*, for example, as part of voluminous transmedia storytelling, the Fox series features numerous online music albums and singles on iTunes (many frequently placing in the iTunes bestseller lists), Web tie-ins, a smart phone application ("The Glee Experience") that lets fans sing karaoke along with the *Glee* cast, and even a nation-wide musical tour with castmembers performing in character. On the *Glee* YouTube channel, fans can watch sneak peeks that include scenes and musical numbers from upcoming episodes, plus behind the scenes videos. Fans can also receive text messages about *Glee* content, like hints about future plotlines. The transmedia storytelling of *Glee* continued with *Glee: The 3D Concert Movie* (2011). Most significantly, *Glee* added a reality TV gamedoc to involve fans more fully (in voting for a "fan favorite" to win a \$10,000 prize) and to provide fans a chance to win a role on the series *Glee* itself. *The Glee Project* (Oxygen, 2011-) is designed to award the winner with a contract to be on *Glee* in a seven-episode character arc. The gamedoc provides marketing for *Glee* but also exists as a stand-alone text itself, meaning that viewers do not have to watch *Glee* to understand *The Glee Project*. Contestants sing and act and compete to win time with mentors from *Glee*. All appear in a weekly music video which the judges evaluate and then pick the bottom three for a sing-off, which determines who will be sent home. For the separate "fan favorite" contest, viewers vote on the Oxygen website (at oxygen.com) and access additional videos with more content from *The Glee Project*. *Glee*'s transmedia storytelling has successfully generated an entire subculture of fans, dubbed Gleeks, who seek out and consume all *Glee* content across these various media platforms. With the reality show tie-in in particular, however, the Fox series extends its branding onto another cable channel, and it also prompts fans to want to become the castmembers they see on the show -- once they literally do that, the audience really is entertaining the audience, generating corporate profits.

## **A Kardashian World**

One of the best examples of a problematic use of transmedia storytelling is the reality television franchise *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*, which is rapidly turning an entire cable channel's programming into highly aggressive branding and corporate synergy in a way that exploits fan practices, eschews creative storytelling, and instead focuses on media saturation and product placement supported by loosely scripted stock plotlines. That reality franchise bears further scrutiny, not least because it is also a key instance of a channel profiting from participatory fan culture. It does so in part by manipulating narrative and thematic elements. These include the reality show practice of turning real people into stereotypical types, what I have elsewhere analyzed as "character narratives," where castmembers are portrayed as story "types" starring in elaborate storylines shaped by the rhythms of fictional TV genres, such as sitcoms, soap operas, or dramas (Edwards, 2004). Reality television reverses classic narrative. Instead of trying to make characters seem real, it makes real people into characters, using predictable and repetitive narrative frames.

The E! Kardashian franchise involves a planned multi-platform text in the sense that each additional text contributes to the whole but can stand alone, and each takes the story of this family's life into a specific media environment in order to further the story and communicate with fans. In a striking piece of transmedia storytelling as corporate synergy, the E! network often uses their nightly entertainment news program, *E! News Live*, to interview Kardashian castmembers and to recirculate entertainment news about the show, which functions as quite aggressive marketing for the program (with news host Ryan Seacrest, media mogul and prolific reality TV developer, notably serving as one of the program's executive producers). The reality show has generated successful spin-offs (*Khloé and Lamar* and *Kourtney and Kim Take New York*, a continuation of *Kourtney and Khloé Take Miami*). It also became the basis for a related reality show about Kim Kardashian's public relations representations (and close

friends), Jonathan Chebon and Simon Huck, entitled *The Spin Crowd*. That particular text, a procedural reality show that followed public relations executives, became a blatant vehicle for simple promotion of that agency's clients and products, turning press flacks into reality stars themselves.

The Kardashian intertexts thus exemplify what Meehan (2005) describes as corporate synergy practices, such as spin-offs, recirculation, repackaging (in DVDs for sale), reversioning (behind the scenes specials), recycling (clip shows), and redeployment. Indeed, in addition to the spin-off shows, the Kardashian franchise also featured two different wedding specials, one depicting Khloé Kardashian's wedding to NBA player Lamar Odom, the other, *Kim's Fairytale Wedding: A Kardashian Event*, exhaustively chronicling Kim Kardashian's ill-fated wedding to NBA player Kris Humphries. In other reality roles, stepfather Bruce Jenner has appeared on reality shows previously (*I'm a Celebrity...Get Me Out of Here*, *Skating With Celebrities*), Kim and brother Rob Kardashian have both competed on *Dancing With the Stars*, and stepbrother Brody Jenner, who sometimes guest stars on *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*, has starred on several reality shows (MTV's *The Hills*, *Bromance*, and FOX's short-lived *The Princes of Malibu*, which was about two of Bruce Jenner's sons from a previous marriage).

In other transmedia features, the Kardashian books include Kris Jenner's autobiography (*Kris Jenner...And All Things Kardashian* [2011]) and the New York Times bestseller, *Kardashian Confidential* (2010), a book about how sisters Kim, Kourtney, and Khloé experience their reality stardom and their pre-stardom lives. Additional online content includes pitches for the products they promote on their shows. Their aggressive marketing and product integration includes a nail polish line, clothing lines (with various companies, including Sears and QVC), perfume lines, diet supplements (*QuickTrim*), cosmetics (*Perfect Skin*), and a short-lived credit card endorsement that the Kardashians abandoned when there was a fan outcry over the card's exorbitant interest rates. Other product integration includes three locations of their own clothing boutique, *Dash* (with stores in Los Angeles, Miami, and New York), which become frequent settings on the series.

In marketing that blurs the line between the reality show and commercials, the Kardashian sisters promote their various products with commercials that use their personae from their reality shows. In such appearances and in interviews, the three sisters often roll their eyes at their momager Kris Jenner, who is portrayed as overbearing, yet they also acknowledge her as the family media mogul and executive producer on the Kardashian branded reality shows. Jenner provides one key guiding vision to how the family is portrayed, marketed, and branded.

The Kardashian shows have been polarizing, not least because of their obvious profit motive and manipulation, and all of the aggressive product integration, product endorsement, and branding. The family shares a six-figure payment for each reality episode, but their endorsements earn them much more, with the family pocketing \$65 million in 2010 alone (Newman, 2011). In perhaps the best example of narrative manipulation in the service of profits, with Kim's wedding special, the franchise turned a fairytale romance and wedding story into a multi-million dollar wedding. The televised special covering the wedding aired in two parts and garnered high ratings for E! (4.4 million viewers the first night and 4 million the second) (Collins, 2011). With the lavish, multi-million dollar wedding came media comparisons to the Prince William and Princess Catherine royal wedding (earning the Kardashians sometimes satirical analogies to American versions of celebrity as royalty). When Kim's media spectacle wedding to Kris Humphries ended in divorce 72 days later, many journalists and commentators criticized the opulent wedding and questioned whether the marriage had been a sham for the cameras. As part of the media backlash, one viewer even started a petition to ban the Kardashians from television because she felt they embodied empty, materialistic values and that the public had "had enough" of them. Addressed to E!, with more than 165,000 signatures, the online petition states: "We are respectfully requesting that your network find other shows to air. *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* is just not viewing that we the public would like to see from your network. Enough is enough." When interviewed in the press, petition organizer Cyndy Snider explained:

We feel that these shows are mostly staged and place an emphasis on vanity, greed, promiscuity, vulgarity and over-the-top conspicuous consumption. While some may have begun watching the spectacle as mindless entertainment or as a sort of 'reality satire,' it is a sad truth that many young people

are looking up to this family and are modeling their appearance and behavior after them. (Jancelewicz, 2011, para. 8)

However, the next season premiere of the reality show *Kourtney and Kim Take New York* (in November 2011), which promised to explain what happened in the marriage and why it ended in divorce, garnered the highest ratings for the series yet (3.2 million viewers, up from the show's January 2011 premiere of 3 million viewers) (Villarreal, 2011). The record ratings suggest that on one level, the negative publicity had only helped the Kardashian celebrity branding efforts.

In part, as a transmedia story, the Kardashian franchise is tied to the appeal of the familiar TV narratives the family embodies. Even if viewers felt cheated by the marriage narrative, fans will return for a new narrative, i.e. the story of how it all went wrong. The new story hook becomes Kim's reassessment of her idealistic true love concepts and her embrace of a more worldly view of relationships in today's society (in which over 50 percent of all marriages end in divorce). Yet even as such stories cross different media platforms and prompt fan interaction, they depend on stereotypical character narratives and recycled reality sitcom and docusoap types. Kris Jenner appears as the overbearing matriarch to her children with her late first husband Robert Kardashian (famous as one of O.J. Simpson's attorneys). Daughter Kim is framed as the uptight perfectionist, Khloé as the irreverent funny sister, and Kourtney the laid-back sibling who is herself a new mother contending with an alcoholic boyfriend. Rob has a storyline in which he struggles to break out of his character narrative as the lazy, aimless brother who lives off of his sisters. Even his *Dancing With the Stars* appearance furthers that storyline. There, Rob and other dancers declared in edited interviews on that show that he was finally "becoming a man" and "stepping out of the shadow of his sisters," while earning respect for dancing well enough to be the show's runner-up, as decided by a combination of judges' scores and fan votes. Young daughters Kendall and Kylie Jenner, children of Kris and Bruce Jenner and half-sisters to the Kardashians, are framed on the Kardashian reality shows as idealistic teens trying to enjoy their childhood in the midst of the pressures of family fame. Bruce Jenner is the doddering, powerless father and stepfather whom the brood find boring and overly-strict but tolerate because he is well-intentioned.

Increasingly, the stock storylines become a way to advertise the show and the family as brand. Many plotlines (some more obviously staged than others) plumb familiar sitcom narratives: teens learn to drive, jealous sisters bicker with each other, daughters rebel against their parents. Others mine docusoap and drama narratives: a son is rushed to the hospital, kids deal with grief from the earlier death of the family patriarch, adults attempt to overcome tensions in marriages and relationships.

In a newer development, many Kardashian series stories are becoming meta-commentaries on reality stardom. Kris worries about her appearance in front of cameras and gets plastic surgery, Kim and Khloé fight about who is more famous or more jealous of the other, Kourtney's boyfriend Scott Disick grows weary of always being placed in the villain role on TV. On the most recent season of *Kourtney and Kim Take New York* (2011-2012), in Kim's confession of her own unhappiness in marriage leading up to her divorce, she explains in direct address interviews to viewers that she felt she rushed into the marriage, got caught up in all the media attention and the "fairy tale" narrative, and fears she disappointed everyone. But she insists that all the press pundits claiming her marriage was a sham are wrong and that she married for love. By engaging with the meta-narrative of the family's media celebrity, these plotlines allow the series further to market themselves and the family brand, engaging in saturation and excessive branding.

The Kardashians thus combine storytelling across media platforms with extremely aggressive marketing and branding. Their branding practices have led industry magazines to insist that the Kardashians are a building a new, highly-influential business model based on the key elements of: the success of their reality shows, social media interaction with fans, and profitable products and brand endorsements, all in the service of promoting the Kardashians as a brand. As Khloé Kardashian Odom notes: "These shows are a 30-minute commercial" (Newman, 2011). Even E! network executives report that it has altered the network's brand itself. According to Lisa Berger, E!'s Executive Vice President for original programming, "It has changed the face of E!. We were a place to report on celebrity; we weren't a place to break and

make celebrity, which is now the whole idea of the E! brand" (Newman, 2011, para. 11). Meanwhile, Kris Jenner argues for the show's appeal based on the family's relatability:

We're just this big family with a lot of drama and a lot of issues, and there's someone here for everyone to relate to. I think if you've ever been embarrassed by your family -- like your mother's a kook or your father's too strict -- the show gives you hope. I've had so many people come over to me and say, 'I remember the episode where you were crying over blah, blah, blah and it helped me so much and I got through my dad's death because of you.' (Newman, 2011, para. 2)

Her arguments about the success of their family life stories depend on the idea of them fitting into relatable family tropes, while presenting their large, boisterous family life as a spectacle and a family circus, yet her comment also speaks to the superficiality and blandness of the content (because the content is secondary to the branding, merely becoming an excuse for marketing). Keeping Up With the Kardashians enjoys consistently high ratings (averaging over 3.5 million per week), while the season 4 finale set a record as the most-watched television episode on E!, with 4.8 million viewers (Newman, 2011). Moving beyond the reality show into their transmedia presence, the Kardashian fanbase is quite large. Each Kardashian has at least one million Twitter followers, while Kim tops the list at over 12 million, and the family as a whole has over 30 million followers. Kim Kardashian is paid to hawk products on Twitter, which is another example of corporate branding trends on Twitter (Edwards, 2009). Their model of reality TV shows as the basis for multiplatform storytelling, particularly with features that brand the castmembers as characters, is clearly a bellwether for future media trends. Kim Kardashian might also signal a new attitude towards reality TV when she insisted, in a 2010 interview with *W* magazine, that people no longer see the dystopian satire of *The Truman Show*, in which TV producers stage a man's world without his knowledge in order to film his life for viewer entertainment, as a bad thing (Hirschberg, 2010). She certainly offers a model of welcoming that level of surveillance, and her implication is that such surveillance is about building an entertainment brand.

### **Transmedia Texts, Character Branding, and Reality TV**

I would argue that in the case of reality TV, at least, character takes on increased importance in many reality transmedia texts. Applying the concept of transmedia storytelling to reality TV shows requires a few adjustments in the theory, since the programs are about actual people, rather than encyclopedic fictional worlds of the kind Jenkins describes. Yet, as we have seen with the Kardashians, reality franchises can obviously be planned transmedia texts. Since reality shows depend on the storytelling codes drawn from fictional TV genres (like primetime dramas, sitcoms, and soap operas), their use of storytelling across multiple media platforms would qualify as an example of transmedia texts. As reality shows bank on larger than life castmembers who draw in viewers with their emotional outbursts, conflicts, and melodramatic resolutions, reality TV characters become the basis for entire brands as well as for transmedia storytelling that depends on active fans.

In describing transmedia storytelling, Jenkins (2007) argues that successful transmedia texts must create a rich, encyclopedic fictional universe with enough gaps in the open-ended narrative for different texts to fill in the spaces. Even more crucially, the narrative has to offer enough spaces for fans to want to fill them in, engaging with that entire fictional world in their own fan responses (including fan fiction). Each additional piece of planned content in the larger transmedia text is able to exist on its own but also contribute to the overall story. Each added item also draws on the strengths and features of each medium (such as television's ability to tell stories in on-going episodes and story arcs, film's capacity to be immersive, or a video game's power to let fans explore the world depicted) (Jenkins, 2007). However, Jenkins (2007) argues that transmedia texts tend to focus on the overall fictional universe rather than on particular plotlines and characters, such that a changing cast of characters and their stories can inhabit different aspects of that fictional world. Here, I depart from Jenkins, because I would argue that for reality TV, character itself becomes a focal point of transmedia storytelling.

As a case of how reality series can take a character, brand it, and turn it into transmedia storytelling profit, Bravo's *Real Housewives* franchise consistently follows that path. For example, cult figures like Bethenny Frankel and NeNe Leakes from the *Real Housewives* franchise are narratively framed as charismatic personalities. In their reality storylines, they sport quick humor and sometimes outrageous behavior, and

they claim always to "be themselves" on camera. They insist that they will tell anyone exactly what they think, and their viewers are encouraged to identify with their emotional roller-coaster rides, what Ien Ang (1985) would call the "tragic structure of feeling" common in soap operas (p. 47). Both women appear in the Bravo Real Housewives-related media texts on different platforms that engage in excessive branding, such as DVDs with extra commentary, companion books, reunion specials, numerous online games on the Bravo website, mobile phone apps (like the "Housewives Hub," with news and gossip about the cast), personal appearances by the cast, and, in an aggressive example of corporate synergy, in interviews with Bravo TV executive and talk show host Andy Cohen on his live Bravo talk show, Watch What Happens Live.

Frankel in particular has used her reality stardom to create her own corporate synergy and branding of herself as a character (profiting both her and Bravo). She has starred on three different Bravo reality shows (the first three seasons of *The Real Housewives of New York City* [2008-] and her own *Bethenny Getting Married?* [2010] and *Bethenny Ever After* [2011-] spin-offs). Her draw as a reality star is indicated by the fact that *Bethenny Getting Married?*, which depicted her wedding to Jason Hoppy, had the highest rated series premiere on Bravo at that time (with more than 2 million viewers) (Stanhope, 2010). Her media presence is based on her characterization on reality TV as the witty, fast-talking, brash New Yorker with the heart of gold. She is most often portrayed as using humor to deal with the chaos of juggling her work with her new marriage and child. Her character narrative revolves around stories typical to family sitcoms (new parents try to sleep through the night, in-laws hover, the wife rushes to put a holiday dinner together with humorously disastrous results) or dramatic plotlines (the husband and wife argue over what role religion will play in the child's life, the couple grapple with business pressures, they deal with family illnesses).

But what is most striking about her is how Frankel has parlayed that reality stardom into her own corporate synergy efforts. In building her character as brand, Frankel has appeared on two other reality programs, both gamedocs: she was one of two finalists on *The Apprentice: Martha Stewart* (2005), prior to her *Real Housewives* stint, and she was the runner-up on *Skating With the Stars* (2011). A natural foods chef, Frankel drew on her reality stardom to release her own books, DVDs, online materials, diet products, cosmetics, and clothing lines. All part of her "Skinnygirl" line of products, they include items that span different media formats, such as: a diet book and audio accompaniment (*Naturally Thin* [2009] and *The Skinnygirl Rules* [2010]), a cookbook (*The Skinnygirl Dish* [2009]), exercise DVDs (*Body by Bethenny* [2010]), and an online personal trainer (*Skinnygirl Personal Trainer*). Most notably, she published a *New York Times* bestselling self-help book, *A Place of Yes: 10 Rules for Getting Everything You Want out of Life* (2011). Developing her *Skinnygirl* line further, Frankel founded her own company, *Skinnygirl Cocktails*, and then sold her line of cocktails to a larger company, Fortune Brands' *Beam Global*, for an estimated \$120 million ("Forbes," 2011). Frankel is currently continuing her transmedia branding of herself with a fictional novel she is writing, entitled *Skinnydipping*, which she advertises on her Twitter feed (to her over 730,000 followers) and her webpage (*Bethenny.com*). On her book tour, she billed herself as an inspirational speaker, telling fans humor-filled stories about how she found success as a woman business owner and author (with footage from the book tour featured on *Bethenny Ever After*), and such tours cement her as a brand.

Meanwhile, NeNe Leakes, from *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* (2008-), parlayed her reality stardom there into a role on *The Celebrity Apprentice* (in 2011). While she has not generated the level of corporate branding that Frankel has, she is similar to Frankel in becoming a cult figure, known for being outspoken and confrontational. In her character narratives onscreen, she declares loyalty to her friends but engages in highly melodramatic storylines in which she has volatile fights with them, sometimes becoming estranged from them. Most famously, Leakes quit *The Celebrity Apprentice* during the season because she objected to how other celebrity castmembers, like Star Jones, were playing the game. In other dramatic storylines on *The Real Housewives*, Leakes searched for and met her biological father for the first time, advocated for domestic violence survivors like herself, and became separated from her current husband after on-going marital tensions and his financial troubles. In media ventures that bank on her reality show characterizations, Leakes has published her own autobiography (*Never Make the Same Mistake Twice: Lessons on Love and Life Learned the Hard Way* [2009]). She also undertakes speaking tours and celebrity appearances.

More notably in terms of cultural responses to reality TV and fan culture, Leakes has become the favorite reality star of many media personalities. Cohen openly worships her on his Watch What Happens Live, journalist Anderson Cooper frequently declares his obsession with her, and the cast of Glee have emoted their stalker-level joy at her 2012 guest star turn on the Fox cult hit television series (Mann, 2011). Bravo purposefully markets the fact that Leakes has become a fixation for other celebrities, like Sean "Diddy" Combs, who declares himself a NeNe "fanatic." In an example of series-related sponsor content on its website, Bravo trumpeted the Diddy fan story alongside advertising for the partnership between his Ciroc Vodka line and the Real Housewives franchise for a 2011 holiday sweepstakes competition (with the winner meeting some of the cast) and safe driving ad campaign (Werthmann, 2011).

Thus, while both women appear in the tie-in media products about the Real Housewives franchise, each woman has also taken her own "brand" and "character" into other media areas (autobiographies, other reality shows that are not part of the Real Housewives franchise, Twitter feeds, etc.). Meanwhile, Bravo has generated excessive branding and corporate synergy around them, as with the sponsored content and ad campaigns. The cable network banks on transmedia storytelling to engage in this branding.

### **Participatory Fan Culture**

There are also some key counter-examples of transmedia storytelling that involve artists examining the aesthetics of new media interactivity and multi-platform texts and that provide greater audience access and expression. As such, they offer competing dynamics, in contrast with the Kardashian model of excessive branding. Some of these texts include participatory fan culture in a much different way.

A particularly good example of audience-centered transmedia storytelling is the music videos of filmmaker Chris Milk. Milk provides innovations in crowdsourced music videos, a trend in which Internet users help generate the content for videos. This kind of media text exemplifies Pierre Lévy's "collective intelligence" knowledge model. Lévy has argued that the Internet privileges what he calls "collective intelligence," where no one person knows all of the information being presented but rather each person contributes to a larger group knowledge, with the whole being greater than the sum of the parts. Lévy contrasts that model with an earlier model of "shared intelligence," where each member of a group possesses the same common knowledge (Jenkins, 2006, p. 4). For Lévy, this new model of knowledge speaks to the democratic and utopian promise of interactive digital media.

I would argue that Milk's films provide examples of productive collective intelligence and aesthetic expression. His curated Web-based art memorial entitled The Johnny Cash Project is one exciting and lively example. In a "global collective art project," filmmaker Chris Milk created a platform for fans to draw the frames of a music video for Cash's version of the song "Ain't No Grave." The template takes images of Cash from earlier film documentaries, such as Johnny Cash: The Man, His World, His Music (Robert Elfstrom's 1969 documentary). Using a custom drawing program, users select a frame online and draw over it digitally. Once they submit their image, it is included in different versions of the music video that play online. Each collection of frames is different, cycling and changing over time. Users can vote on the contributions they like best, and the site includes data such as the number of brush strokes used in any given frame. Internet consumers lured by a shared interest in a music icon can feel part of an online community creating tribute art together. The images projected are generated by a collaboration between producers and consumers, and the consumers in effect "vote" on what images are screened most frequently. Some of the beliefs driving this kind of participatory fan culture trend, and indeed, the staggering rise in digital media usage more generally, involve visions of connectivity.<sup>2</sup> Many audiences thirst for immersive online content as well as community-building, based on the idea that digital interactions via social networking websites can make consumers feel part of larger affinity groups. While the film is a music video for the American Recordings label and Lost Highway Records release of the Cash song, in the case of this crowdsourced music video project, the emphasis is on audience expression and access rather than on corporate branding.

In another example of recent participatory fan culture media trends, some interactive videos use the technique of mass customization. This technique has become a dominant marketing strategy, in which an advertisement appears to be customized to each viewer, based on an aggregate of user information. An obvious example is the recommendations Amazon.com makes "for you" based on your past consumer



behavior. Those recommendations might appear personal to you, but thousands of other users will receive the same "personalized" data, because it is personalized on a mass scale. In an example from entertainment media, producer McG's online TV show, *Aim High*, mass customizes by incorporating each viewer's name into the scenery and music from their iTunes library, which furthers corporate synergy and branding.

In an example of a more creative use of this media trend, Milk has also used this mass customization technique in his online interactive music videos, such as a music video entitled "3 Dreams of Black" that functions like a video game, with the user clicking on images to open or choosing directions to take, guiding where the video goes. His interactive Web film *The Wilderness Downtown* (a video for Arcade Fire's song "We Used to Wait") has users type in the address of their childhood home, and a Google Earth image of their home becomes one of the settings in the video (and the effect of seeing images of your childhood home in a music video can be unexpectedly poignant).

Some other recent media culture includes innovative texts whose very format relies on interactive creation involving both producers and consumers. Television offers some cogent examples. *Bar Karma*, a show on Current TV, has fans vote for and contribute storylines online. *Beckenfield*, a "Mass Participation Television" science fiction show launched by online entertainment company Theatrics, has audiences pay a subscription fee and then allows them to contribute segments to the show (designed for aspiring actors to gain a forum for furthering their careers). While some participants in these shows might be using the platform as a springboard to professional employment in the media industry, the more complex producer-consumer interactions are nonetheless different in kind from, say, Amazon's mass customization marketing and branding.

In contrast, once again, the technique of mass customization also has problematic uses. Andrejevic (2007b) argues that when a consumer interacts with a text on the Internet, for example by voting online for their favorite singer on *American Idol* and posting their comments, that user is providing the Fox network with free labor by providing user-generated content for them on their website. More crucially, that user is the product being sold to corporate advertisers, as when Fox tries to prove to an advertiser that it can deliver a certain demographic of viewers who will not only watch the television show but also visit the website and see the ad -- or, increasingly, watch the show episode online.

Examples of this "self-performed consumer research" use of mass customization on TV include the customization of websites for users once they register for the sites and express their interests (on a future visit to the site, you can be taken directly to your favorite reality show or castmember and their updates). MTV even advertises a new mobile phone app called "WatchWith" that sends you comments from other viewers in real time about the same show you are watching on MTV. They pitch to viewers by saying the "Watch With" app will gossip with you about reality TV like *Jersey Shore* even when real-world friends will not. Emphasizing the liveness and the interactivity of this product, MTV depends on crowdsourcing (the comments of thousands of viewers) and mass customization (each person using the app has it customized for their show preferences). Unfortunately, the app feels like a fake digital friend meant to replace actual real-life friends, all formed through aggregating data.

In other examples of crowdsourcing, MTV and E! routinely include viewer comments from their website message boards or from Facebook or Twitter posts as a scroll at the bottom of the screen, with viewers commenting on the television shows being aired. Their comments are "being included" but only on a mass scale. In an example related to branding, the short-lived MC Hammer family reality show, *Hammertime*, included on-screen graphics of Hammer's Tweets along with fan responses. In his discussion of multimedia branding efforts at an academic panel at Stanford, which aired on the premiere episode, Hammer notes that his incorporation of Tweets was meant to make an emotional and interactive connection to viewers and to send them to his Twitter feed, which hawked more of his products, and to further his content creation and branding for various media platforms.

A particularly problematic example of crowdsourcing is an Internet-based reality TV show that downplays the potential for exploitation involved in this audience interactivity. Actor Seth Green produced an "online interactive reality TV show," *ControlTV*, in which viewers vote to determine what star Tristan Couvares

will do, literally choosing what the young man starring on the show will do each day (from which young woman to date to what clothes to wear). This young man's life becomes entertainment for viewers, and they are given the power to help him or harm him, all for the audience's viewing pleasure. While Green's website pitches the idea of audience community, the show itself also obviously entails some degree of exploitation, voyeurism, and public humiliation -- the calling cards of many reality programs. Green pitched the show as the real-life EDtv (1999) in action. The EDtv film was itself both a comedy and a cautionary satire about the potentially degrading and debasing effects of reality TV. However, as we have seen with Kim Kardashian, many of today's reality stars are more likely to turn earlier dystopian satires of reality TV into rallying cries for their own desire for stardom.

However, in all of these examples of transmedia storytelling, it is important to examine the dynamics of how fan participation is integrated into these media trends, because the power relationships and producer-consumer relationships can vary by context. This issue opens out onto a larger debate about the cultural politics and economics of this use of new media interactivity in general. Many of these effects depend on how various audiences respond to the texts. The unpredictable behaviors of avid television fans provide a good case in point, such as fan spoiler behavior for reality television. Survivor online communities have infamously conspired to predict the show's outcome and influence audience reception of that result. Active fans who watched live Internet feeds of Big Brother posted spoilers to message boards before the edited versions made it to the air. Some fans went so far as to try to disrupt and influence the game (flying a banner over the Big Brother compound, pulled behind an airplane, warning one contestant not to trust another one). American Idol fans have famously organized efforts via the Web to disrupt voting, either by "voting for the worst" singer or voting against contestants the judges support. It is often in the fan response that one can see the issues convergence culture raises, and, again, that fan response can depend on the specific context, with effects that can vary widely.

Ultimately, the rise of transmedia storytelling reflects some competing trends in current media culture, including an emphasis on corporate branding versus substantive audience expression. The Kardashian franchise might signal a new wave of excessive branding, and the prevalence and popularity of the kind of approach suggests that it will continue to have a significant impact on media culture. Nevertheless, counter-examples such as the Chris Milk crowdsourced music videos, which emphasize audience access, creativity, and collectivity, suggest that the effects of transmedia storytelling can depend crucially on context.

## Notes

1. Jenkins (2006) cites political scientist Ithiel de Sola Pool's book *Technologies of Freedom* [1983] as the first to discuss the media convergence concept.

2. Internet users are now estimated to be 2 billion people worldwide, or around 30% of the world's population, with percentages varying by region (usage in North America is highest at 78% of the population). One study found that the growth in Internet usage worldwide between 2000 and 2011 was 480 percent. See Internet World Stats. (2012). Retrieved from <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>

## References

Andrejevic, M. (2007a). *iSpy: Surveillance and power in the interactive era*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.

Andrejevic, M. (2007b, April 5). *Watching TV without pity*. FlowTV. Retrieved from <http://flowtv.org/2007/04/watching-tv-without-pity/>

Andrejevic, M. (2003). *Reality TV: The work of being watched*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

- Ang, I. (1985). *Watching Dallas: Television and the melodramatic imagination*. London: Routledge.
- Bar Karma. (2012). *Current TV*. Retrieved from <http://current.com/shows/bar-karma/>
- Beckinfield. (2011). Retrieved from <http://www.beckinfield.com>
- C Werthmann, (2011). Why Diddy hearts NeNe: The major mogul shares his Real Housewives fixation [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://www.bravotv.com/blogs/the-dish/why-diddy-hearts-nene>
- Collins, S. (2011, October 11). Kim Kardashian's wedding special toasts giant ratings. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.latimes.com>
- ControlTV. (2010). Retrieved from <http://controltv.com>
- Edwards, L. H. (2009, May). Twitter: Democratizing the media versus corporate branding. *FlowTV*. Retrieved from <http://flowtv.org/2009/05/twitter-democratizing-the-media-corporate-branding-leigh-h-edwards-florida-state-university/>
- Edwards, L. H. (2004). 'What a girl wants': Gender norming on reality game shows. *Feminist Media Studies*, 4(2), 226-228.
- Forbes magazine looking into Bethenny Frankel's financials. (2011, October 13). *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.huffingtonpost.com>
- Gillan, J. (2011). *Television and new media: Must-click TV*. New York: Routledge.
- Hirschberg, L. (2010, November). Kim Kardashian: The art of reality. *W Magazine*, 108-115.
- Jancelewicz, C. (2011, November 25). 'Boycott Kim Kardashian' petition picks up steam online. *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.aoltv.com/2011/11/25/kim-kardashian-boycott-petition/>
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York: New York University Press.
- Jenkins, H. (2007, March 22). Transmedia storytelling 101. Retrieved from [http://www.henryjenkins.org/2007/03/transmedia\\_storytelling\\_101.html](http://www.henryjenkins.org/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html)
- Mann, C. (2011, December 20). 'Real Housewives of Atlanta' star NeNe Leakes to guest star on 'Glee.' *CBS News*. Retrieved from <http://www.cbsnews.com>
- Meehan, E. R. (2005). *Why TV is not our fault: Television, programming, viewers, and who's really in control*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Milk, C. (2010). *The Johnny Cash Project*. Retrieved from <http://www.thejohnnycashproject.com/#/about>
- Milk, C. (n.d.). *The Wilderness Downtown*. Retrieved from <http://www.thewildernessdowntown.com/>
- Newman, J., & Bruce, L. (2011, February 16). How the Kardashians made \$65 million last year. *The Hollywood Reporter*. Retrieved from <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com>
- Ouellette, L., & Hay, J. (2008). *Better living through reality TV: Television and post-welfare citizenship*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Stanhope, K. (2010, July 11). Ratings: Bethenny Getting Married? the Most-Watched series debut in Bravo history. *TVGuide*. Retrieved from <http://www.tvguide.com>

Villarreal, Y. (2011, November 28). 'Kourtney & Kim Take New York' scores big ratings. Los Angeles Times. Retrieved from <http://www.latimes.com>

### **About the Author**

**Leigh H. Edwards** is Associate Professor of English at Florida State University. She is the author of *Johnny Cash and the Paradox of American Identity* (Indiana University Press, 2009). Her work in media studies has been published in journals such as *Feminist Media Studies*, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies*, *Narrative*, *FLOW: A Critical Forum for Television and Media Culture*, *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, and *Southern Cultures*. She is on the Editorial Board of *Pop Culture Universe: Icons, Idols, Ideas* (ABC-CLIO) and is a staff writer for *Pop Matters* (the international magazine of cultural criticism published on-line at [atpopmatters.com](http://atpopmatters.com)). Writing on topics ranging from rockabilly to Twitter, she focuses in particular on constructions of gender in popular music, television, and new media. She has a forthcoming book on reality TV and new media trends, and she is currently completing a book on Dolly Parton and gender in popular music.