Transmedia Is Dead. Long Live Transmedia! (Or Life, Passion and the Decline of a Concept)

Las narrativas transmedia han muerto, ¡Larga vida a las narrativas transmedia! (O vida, pasión y declive de un concepto)

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Abstract:

Concepts have a life cycle that goes through their birth, development and decadence. Like biological or technological species, words are born, grow, develop and enter a period of decline that, in many cases, can mean death and burial between the pages of an old dictionary. This paper focuses on a single concept – 'transmedia' ('transmedia storytelling') – and compares its evolution with other key concepts of the 1990s cybercultures: 'hypertext', 'multimedia', 'hypermedia', etc. Considering the exploratory nature of this research, the evolution of the concepts will be represented using Google's nGram Viewer. The trajectory of "transmedia" is analysed both in the professional and academic/scientific circuits and the different semantic circulation and appropriation rules these environments are subject to are considered. The paper ends with a final reflection on the future of 'transmedia' and an evaluation of possible alternative concepts.

Keywords: *transmedia, multimedia, concepts, evolution, Google nGram Viewer*

Resumen:

Los conceptos poseen un ciclo vital que pasa por su nacimiento, desarrollo y decadencia. Como las especies biológicas o tecnológicas, las palabras nacen, crecen, se desarrollan y entran en un período de declive

que, en muchos casos, puede significar la muerte y su entierro en las páginas de un viejo diccionario. Este artículo se concentra en un único concepto – 'transmedia' ('narrativas transmedia') – y compara su evolución con otros conceptos clave de la cibercultura de los años 1990: 'hipertexto', 'multimedia', 'hipermedio', etc. Considerando el carácter exploratorio de esta investigación, la evolución de los conceptos se representará utilizando el *nGram Viewer* de Google. La trayectoria de 'transmedia' es analizada tanto en el circuito profesional como en el académico/científico, teniéndose en consideración las diferentes reglas semánticas de circulación y apropiación a la que estos campos están sujetos. El trabajo concluye con una reflexión final sobre el futuro de 'transmedia' y una evaluación acerca de posibles conceptos alternativos.

Palabras clave: *transmedia, multimedia, conceptos, evolución, Google nGram Viewer*

A personal story can serve as an introduction to this paper. The author of this paper was living in Italy when the digital revolution arrived in the early 1990s. In that period the author participated in the first experiences of hypertextual writing with HyperCard, the software for Macintosh created by Bill Atkinson that popularized the creation of the textual networks imagined by Vannevar Bush (2001[1945]) and Ted Nelson (1992). The company was at the front line of multimedia production of interactive CD-Roms in Italy; it was a great moment, every week a new software or version arrived and the teams made great efforts for programmers, graphic designers, musicians, video experts and interaction designers to jump on the same train and go for a ride together. Between 1990 and 1995 the company was identified as an avant-garde 'multimedia company' because of its production of highly interactive CD-Roms that included texts, photos, videos, animations, music, sounds and a lot of interaction. Macromedia Director was the software that made it possible to integrate textual components in a single interface.

What was the situation at the end of the 1990s? Most of the company partners (photographers, musicians, animators, etc.) were offering 'multimedia' contents and services to their clients. The CD-Rom was a media on the verge of extinction and by 'multimedia' these professionals understood the production of websites using Dreamweaver and, later, Flash. If in the early 1990s the concept of 'multimedia' was useful for introducing a difference and gaining visibility in the new emerging digital market, in the year 2000, everyone was 'selling multimedia' to their clients.

The concept was almost useless for gaining differentiation in an overloaded professional market full of 'multimedia' companies.

Concepts have a life cycle that marks their birth, development and decadence. Like biological or technological species, words are born, grow, develop and enter a period of decline that, in many cases, can mean death and burial between the pages of an old dictionary. The new concepts tend to break into the conversations of a very specific group and, if they fulfil their function of naming something new that is asking for a definition, they expand virally to all kinds of discourses and conversational exchanges. The acceleration of the post-industrial society multiplies discourses and speeds up their circulation. To say 'multimedia' or 'hypertext' – two key concepts of the cybercultures of the early 1990s – on the verge of the year 2020 definitely sounds *expired*.

This paper focuses on a single concept: 'transmedia', a notion first used in the artistic and professional circuit of the 1960s in the United States. Introduced into media studies by Marsha Kinder ('transmedia intertextuality') in the early 1990s and later expanded by Henry Jenkins ('transmedia storytelling'), in a few years this concept transformed into a magic keyword inside professional and academic environments (Kinder, 1991; Jenkins, 2003, 2006a, 2007).

In 2003 Jenkins talked about 'transmedia storytelling' in a meeting with media professionals. As every media scholar or professional knows, shortly after the concept was adopted by many Hollywood creators to name a certain type of narrative strategy that, in addition to expanding the fictional worlds in different media and platforms, also gave importance to the participation of fans in that expansion (Jenkins, 2003, 2006a; Scolari, 2013). The concept went through a series of displacements: from fiction to non-fiction, from the academic to the professional world, from the United States to Europe and the rest of the world. Two decades after its emergence, 'transmedia' seems to be one of the most popular concepts in media and communication conversations, spanning from 'transmedia journalism' to 'transmedia documentary', 'transmedia branding', 'transmedia performance', or even 'transmedia knowledge management'. Today many researchers, professors, students and professionals are discussing the limits of the concept and the possible alternatives.

This paper focuses on the origins, expansion, naturalization, uses and abuses of the concept of 'transmedia'. Its life cycle is compared with other media and communication keywords of the 1990s. The paper finishes with the presentation of a couple of conceptual alternatives and a series of reflections on the velocity of concept circulation in contemporary

society, both in scientific and professional conversational circuits. The structure of the article is as follows: Section 1 concentrates on the origins of the concept of 'transmedia' and its diffusion over the last 15 years, then Section 2 introduces the opportunities and limitations of Ngram, a data visualization tool created by Google that is used here for the analysis. Section 3 analyses the evolution of different key concepts of digital media and communication studies that have been very popular in the last 25 years, such as 'transmedia', 'multimedia', 'hypertext', etc. Finally, Section 4 proposes a reflection on the evolution and life cycle of 'transmedia' both in professional and academic/scientific circuits and opens the discussion about possible alternative concepts for a 'post-transmedia' era.

1. On the origins of the transmedia species

In the field of Media Studies, one of the first confirmed appearances of the concept of 'transmedia' was in the early 1970s in *The Celluloid Curriculum. How to use movies in the classroom* (Maynard, 1971), a book that presents a series of strategies for exploiting movies in an educational environment. According to Maynard

> The film version of a novel or play has for me two basic functions in the classroom. The first of these is as a legitimate substitute for the work of literature (...) The second use of film based on novels and plays that I recommend will, no doubt, have more appeal to even the most traditional English teacher. The transmedia study is an interesting and unique way of surveying literature. By this I mean have students read a novel or play and then show the film version of it –not for the purpose of reinforcement, however. The film should be viewed and noted for the ways it treats its prose equivalent. How does the plot change? How are the characters portrayed? In what ways does the cinematography complement or substitute for the descriptive passages of prose? How has the fluid action of the film 'opened up' the action of the novel or play? Does the film communicate the attitudes of the author? Does the film distort them? Does it in any way improve on the text? (...) The transmedia method is a wonderful way to present in-depth literary study in the classroom. (Maynard, 1971: 88-90)

Maynard, in other words, was proposing analysing the 'intersemiotic translations' or 'trasmutations' as defined by Jakobson, that is, an "interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems" (Jakobson, 1959:233). Nevertheless, there were also pioneers of the

transmedia concept outside the academic circuit. In the 1960-70s there were a couple of television production companies using the concept, for example Transmedia Productions, Transmedia Educational Services, and Transmedia International Corp., all of them from New York. For people interested in transmedia archaeology, it may be very suggestive to them to discover that in nº 80(7) of the *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers* (1971) a list of new members included one Mr. Carlo DeLeo from New York, who presented himself as Maintenance Supervisor of a company called Transmedia Producer Service (SMPTE, 1971).

1.1. Transmedia Intertextuality

In 1991 Marsha Kinder published *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, a text where she introduced for the first time a concept – 'transmedia intertextuality' – to describe how narrative for young people moves across multiple sources, generating different levels of interactions.

> What I found [from recording Saturday morning children's TV] was a fairly consistent form of *transmedia intertextuality*, which positions young spectators (1) to recognize, distinguish, and combine different popular genres and their respective iconography that cut across movies, television, comic books, commercials, video games, and toys; (2) to observe the formal differences between television and its prior discourse of cinema, which it absorbs, parodies, and ultimately replaces as the dominant mode of image production; (3) to respond to and distinguish between the two basic modes of subject positioning associated respectively with television and cinema, being hailed in direct address by fictional characters or by offscreen voices, and being sutured into imaginary identification with fictional character and fictional space, frequently through the structure of the gaze and through the classical editing conventions of shot/reverse shot; and (4) to perceive both the dangers of obsolescence (as a potential threat to individuals, programs, genres, and media) and the values of compatibility with a larger system of intertextuality, within which formerly conflicting categories can be absorbed and restrictive boundaries erased (Kinder, 1991:47).

In Chapter 1 Kinder explained the origins of 'intertextuality', indicating the works of Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva as her main references, but did not mention the origins of 'transmedia'. She only indicated that "in

this book I will focus primarily on intertextual relations across different narrative media" (1991:2). In an interview conducted by Henry Jenkins (2015) Kinder explained the context of this first application of the concept:

> In *Playing with Power*, instead of using the popular buzz-word convergence, I coined the term transmedia because I saw it as a deliberate, dynamic move across media. This definition partly arose from my own transmedia experience—of having completed a doctoral degree in 18th century English literature in 1967 and then publishing my first article two months later, not on Henry Fielding but on Antonioni's Blow-up. This move from literature to film led one of my literary colleagues to accuse me of having "betrayed the 18th century." Though flattered by the charge, I realized this move was not always freely chosen (...) In *Playing with Power*, I linked this term 'transmedia' to a new kind of postmodernist subjectivity that could be historicized. Priding itself on mobility rather than stability, this new protean subjectivity was embodied in those popular Transformer toys and in the myth of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (...) (Jenkins, 2015).

According to Kinder the famous turtles had acquired their own cultural capital "by becoming a 'transmedia supersystem' whose fluid movement across many different media (from comic books, to games, to television, to movies, and to a slew of licensed products, all with substantial financial rewards) made them even more worthy of imitation" (Jenkins, 2015). In a book published with Tara McPherson –*Transmedia Frictions: The Digital, The Arts and the Humanities* (2014) – Marsha Kinder returned to the concept:

> In choosing to use 'Transmedia' in the title of our anthology, I was reclaiming the term I had coined in 1991 in *Playing with Power*. But, in no way do I object to the way the meanings of transmedia have expanded—that's the way language functions. In fact, Tara and I were also redefining the term 'transmedia,' for it creates an opening for those new media that our anthology didn't cover in depth—including smart phones—and those that haven't yet been invented (...) We were also using it as a substitute for the term "interactive," whose definition and connotations are no longer hotly contested. Transmedia, on the other hand, evokes the issue of medium specificity (still very much in contention), without supporting one side or the other. Yet, as some of the essays in our anthology suggest, it also evokes the historic transformation we

are now experiencing, in which all movies, videos, TV programs, and music are being redefined as software or data, a conversion with seismic financial and cultural consequences (Jenkins, 2015).

As it can be seen, the combination and circulation of concepts in academic circuits is fascinating and it's really worth mapping these movements and appropriations in order to understand the theoretical and, in this specific case, the professional conversations.

1.2. Transmedia Storytelling

The most important conceptual contribution to 'transmedia' arrived in 2003 when Henry Jenkins published a classic article, titled "Transmedia Storytelling. Moving characters from books to films to video games can make them stronger and more compelling" in *Technology Review.* In this text Jenkins explained the context of his original contribution:

> This past month, I attended a gathering of top creatives from Hollywood and the games industry, hosted by Electronic Arts; they were discussing how to collaboratively develop content that would play well across media. This meeting reflected a growing realization within the media industries that what is variously called transmedia, multiplatform, or enhanced storytelling represents the future of entertainment (Jenkins, 2003).

In this article Jenkins applied the adjective 'transmedia' to different nouns: 'transmedia experiences', 'transmedia franchises', 'transmedia storytelling' and 'transmedia stories'. Obviously, the most successful combination was 'transmedia storytelling'. According to Jenkins

> In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best-so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics, and its world might be explored and experienced through game play. Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained enough to enable autonomous consumption. That is, you don't need to have seen the film to enjoy the game and vice-versa. As Pokemon does so well, any given product is a point of entry into the franchise as a whole (Jenkins, 2003).

In future works Jenkins would develop a more complex conception of 'transmedia stortytelling', giving more weight to fans' productions and user-generated contents. In another classic text – *Convergence Culture*

(2006a) – he described the arrival of a new generation of content creators:

> A decade ago, published fan fiction came mostly from women in their twenties, thirties, and beyond. Today, these older writes have been joined by a generation of new contributors who found fan fiction surfing the Internet and decided to see what they could produce. *Harry Potter* in particular has encouraged many young people to write and share their first stories (2006a:178).

In this context 'transmedia storytelling' is more than a story told through different media: user-generated contents are a basic element of these cultural experiences. This link between the media industry (canon) and participatory culture (fandom) is at the centre of Jenkins' most popular book, a text that perfectly synthesizes the situation in the subtitle "Where old and new media collide".

1.3 The boom

What was born in a meeting of top creatives from Hollywood and the games industry became one of the key concepts of contemporary media studies and professional conversations. The first master theses on transmedia storytelling were supervised by Jenkins at the MIT's Department of Comparative Media Studies (i.e. Long, 2007) and two years later Christy Dena defended her PhD thesis titled *Transmedia Practice: Theorising the Practice of Expressing a Fictional World across Distinct Media and Environments* at the University of Sydney (Dena, 2009). The same year MIT Press published *Third Person Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives* by Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin, a collective volume that included many contributions about transmedia narrative worlds and an interview with Henry Jenkins by Sam Ford (Harrigan & Wardrip-Fruin, 2009). In a few years there were abounding theses, articles, books and conference communications all oriented towards analysing transmedia storytelling from different disciplines; researchers approached these new narrative practices from the perspective of fans (Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 2006b), semiotics (Scolari, 2009), narratology (Ryan, 2004, Klastrup & Tosca, 2004), and history (Freeman, 2016).

On the professional side, many producers and scriptwriters working on narrative expansions discovered that they were "doing transmedia". One of the most active companies specializing in transmedia storytelling, Starlight Runner Entertainment, was founded in 2000 by Jeff Gomez and Chrysoula Artemis, three years before the classic article published by Henry Jenkins in *Technology Review*. At the transmedia conference Power

to the Pixel (London, 2011) Jeff Gomez explained "how American major film companies, including Disney, are now using transmedia strategies to have a higher return on their investments. Effectively using more than one platform gives a longer life to a film, and allows multiple access points into a story for a variety of different audiences" (Gaudenzi, 2013:178). But transmedia storytelling was not new for European producers: in 2011 Robert Pratten and Nuno Bernardo had respectively published *Getting Started with Transmedia Storytelling* (Pratten, 2011) and *The Producer's Guide to Transmedia* (Bernardo, 2011). The "how to" bibliography proliferated in the following years around the world, for example Andrea Philips' *A Creator's Guide to Transmedia Storytelling: How to Captivate and Engage Audiences across Multiple Platforms* (Philips, 2012), Acuña and Caloguerea's *Guía para la producción y distribución de contenidos transmedia* (Acuña & Caloguerea, 2012), and Giovagnoli's *Transmedia. Storytelling e Communicazione* (Giovagnoli, 2013). As it can be seen, it was not only in the United States that transmedia strategies were at the top of professional interest. In this context, it is not so surprising that transmedia strategies were also implemented in other areas beyond fiction.

1.4. Beyond fiction

It could be said that journalism has always had a transmedia DNA, even before the emergence of the World Wide Web and collaborative platforms: even in the old times of broadcasting, the 'breaking news' used to expand from radio to television and from there to newspapers and periodicals, adding new contextual elements, characters and sub-plots to the original information. Users, despite the lack of collaborative platforms, could provide their contributions by calling the radio stations and writing letters to the editors of newspapers (Scolari, 2013). This process obviously entered a new dimension with the proliferation of new media and 2.0 communication platforms. At the present time there are no informative media, be they written or audio-visual, that do not invite their receivers to send and share comments, photographs or videos. That's just one of the possible expressions of transmedia journalism, a production area that has also been under the microscope of academic researchers. Kevin Moloney's PhD thesis *Porting transmedia storytelling to journalism* was defended in 2011 at the University of Denver (Moloney, 2011) and in 2012 Denis Renó and Jesús Flores published in Spain *Periodismo transmedia* (Renó & Flores, 2012).

Any map of transmedia storytelling and non-fiction should include the very active area of transmedia documentary. In this case the concept of 'transmedia' was applied in a context dominated by another key-concept:

'interactive documentary' (or 'i-Doc'). Even if they are not the same – an i-Doc is not necessarily a transmedia narrative expanded through different media with the complicity of users – the first PhD thesis on this subject included semantic discussions about the different concepts and definitions (Gifreu, 2013; Gaudenzi, 2013). For example, in her PhD thesis *The Living Documentary: from representing reality to co-creating reality in digital interactive documentary* Sandra Gaudenzi explained that

> Transmedia documentaries are part of the larger form of transmedia narratives, which include fictional narratives (...) In a trans-media story each platform only contains parts of the story, and the user/participant needs to move from one media to the other to have the full picture (examples would be Lance Weiler's *Pandemic 1.0*, Trim Grim's *Conspiracy for Good*, and Martin Ericsson's *The Truth About Marika*) (Gaudenzi, 2013:177).

> In the last decade many transmedia documentaries have been produced, especially in the Global South (Liuzzi, 2015). Two centres emerge as clusters of academic and professional production in the Latin American: the Universidad Nacional de Rosario (Argentina) and EAFIT (Colombia). In the first case, the UNR has produced internationally recognized transmedia documentaries like *Calles perdidas* and *Mujeres en venta* and, at the same time, have published important scientific contributions (Irigaray & Lovato, 2015).

The production of interactive / transmedia documentaries is so high that a couple of projects have been developed to map and keep upgraded databases of this emergent phenomena, like Inter-Doc (http://www.inter-doc.org), MIT's Docubase (https://docubase.mit.edu) and the Radiografía del webdoc a Catalunya (http://www.csora.org/webdoc-catalunya-estudi).

1.5. Uses and abuses

Ten years after the introduction of the concept by Jenkins (2003) 'transmedia' was a key concept of the new media ecology. Hundreds of media companies and professionals around the world were involved in all kinds of proposals. Were all of them expressions of 'transmedia storytelling'? Definitely not. Many initiatives produced under the umbrella concept of the 'transmedia' name were not in fact transmedia: the media expansion was limited to a couple of media (i.e. video + webpage) or there

was no user participation. However, to call them 'transmedia' was a cool way of gaining visibility and showing a kind of fashionable style.

The same happened in academic and scientific circuits. It is not difficult to find articles or PhD theses that include the concept of 'transmedia' in their title but that in fact do not analyse transmedia experiences; however, the inclusion of the concept in the title or in the keywords adds some freshness to traditional research on media productions or processes.

In a few words: *a ghost is haunting the media world – the ghost of transmedia...* As already indicated, this paper would like to describe and analyse the life cycle of concepts like 'transmedia' and, in the last section, open the discussion about possible alternatives, both in the academic/scientific and professional environments.

2. A Culturonomical approach

Is it possible to map this 'big bang' of transmedia storytelling? Without discarding more specific methodologies based on a deeper analysis of scientific databases, this paper will propose an initial exploratory description and analysis of the 'transmedia boom' of the 2000-2010s based on Google's Ngram Book Viewer.

In 2010 Google presented Ngram, a research tool based on the analysis of thousands of digitized books and inspired by the logics of 'culturomics'. According to Michel et al., 2011, 'culturomics' computational analysis could provide

> insights about fields as diverse as lexicography, the evolution of grammar, collective memory, the adoption of technology, the pursuit of fame, censorship, and historical epidemiology. Culturomics extends the boundaries of rigorous quantitative inquiry to a wide array of new phenomena spanning the social sciences and the humanities (Michel et al., 2011).

Inspired by the works of Jean-Baptiste Michel and other researchers from Harvard and MIT, Google's Ngram Viewer was released in December 2010. The viewer is an online search engine that charts the frequencies of any set of comma-delimited search strings using a yearly count of *n*-grams (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/N-gram) *found in* sources printed between 1500 and 2008. The program can search for a single word or a phrase, including misspellings or nonsense expressions.

Regarding its limits, Ngram has been criticized for the inaccurate OCR (optical character recognition) of the books (i.e. in old books the

lowercase long 's' looks like a 'f'', a fact that has long fooled computers); however, researchers consider that there is an overabundance of scientific literature with respect to other texts. Finally, the tool has been criticized for including incorrectly dated or categorized texts. According to Pechenick, Danforth & Dodds (2015)

> the contents of the Google Books corpus do not represent an unbiased sampling of publications. Beyond being library-like, the evolution of the corpus throughout the 1900s is increasingly dominated by scientific publications rather than popular works (...) The Google Books corpus's beguiling power to immediately quantify a vast range of linguistic trends warrants a very cautious approach to any effort to extract scientifically meaningful results (2015).

According to Zhang (2015)

> One of the traps in using ngrams to divine the popularity of people, ideas, or concepts is that a book only appears once—whether it's been read once or millions of times. *The Lord of the Rings is in there once* (...) and so is some random paper on mechanics. The two texts are weighted equally. It doesn't reflect what people are talking about so much as what people are publishing about—and until very recently, most people didn't have access to publishing. Like, what does this really tell you about language? (Zhang, 2015).

Beyond these limits, the Google nGram Viewer tool has been used by scholars from different disciplines for quantifying paradigm change in demography (Bijak et al., 2014), analysing cultural and historical variation in concepts (Oishi et al., 2013), and demonstrating the rise in concrete language in American English over the last 200 years (Hills & Adelman, 2015). Ris (2015) used Ngram to analyse the evolution of the concept 'grilt' in educational discourses, and Zeng & Greenfield (2015) found it useful for investigating changing cultural values in China from 1970 to 2008 and the relationship of changing values to ecological shifts. Erez Lieberman Aiden, a computational geneticist that participated in the original culturomics paper, recognizes that even if "these problems exist in the Ngram corpus", they are "true of any measurement tool in science". He states that "any healthy field is going to include people who are sort of being overly enthusiastic, using data in ways that can't possibly be justified. And other people try to slam the brakes on it" (in Zhang, 2015). From the perspective of the present paper, Ngram is a useful tool for a first exploratory approach to

the life cycle of concepts, both in academic and professional environments.

3. The life cycle of concepts

3.1. The life cycle of 'multimedia' and other cybercultural concepts

Today 'multimedia' is a popular concept accepted by the Oxford dictionary but it is no longer so 'cool' in professional environments. If we check the evolution of the concept of 'multimedia' in Google Ngram Viewer, we can see the progress of the popularity of this word in books published in English (Fig. 1). This image shows very clearly that the 'boom' of the concept was in the late 1980s/early 1990s, when the combination of personal computers, the CD-ROM and the World Wide Web whipped up the production of digital 'multimedia' contents and discourses.
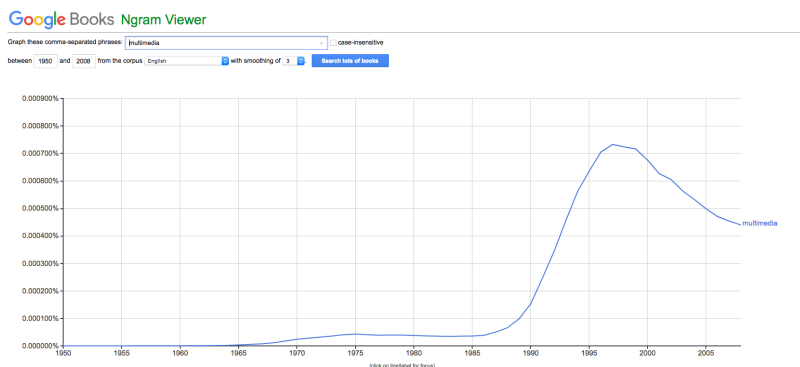
Fig. 1 – Ngram research for 'multimedia' (01 July 2019)

Google Ngram Viewer is a sophisticated tool that also shows the top

substitutions for 'multimedia' (Fig. 2):
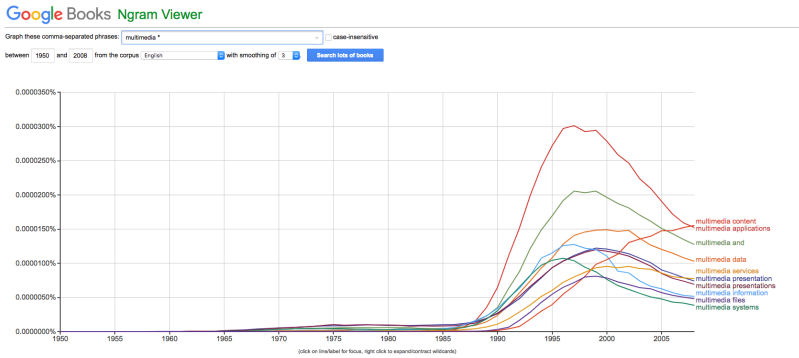
Fig. 2 – Ngram top substitutions for 'multimedia' (01 July 2019)

As it can be seen, the different combinations ('multimedia content', 'multimedia data, 'multimedia services', etc.) were part of the decadence of the concept. The only exception seems to be 'multimedia application'; this increase in the use of the concept is not so strange if we connect it to the dissemination of mobile devices and 'multimedia' apps in the middle 2000s.

The decadence of 'multimedia' was not a single phenomenon: many other concepts that were very popular in the 1990s entered a decadence process at the end of the decade. If we analyse the evolution of other concepts that were part of the emerging cybercultures of the early 1990s, we see a very similar situation. For example, the concepts of 'hypertext' (Fig. 4) and 'virtual reality' (Fig. 3), a concept popularized by Howard Rheingold's book published in 1991, followed the same path as 'multimedia': after a steep climb in the early 1990s, their popularity began to fall as of the end of that decade.
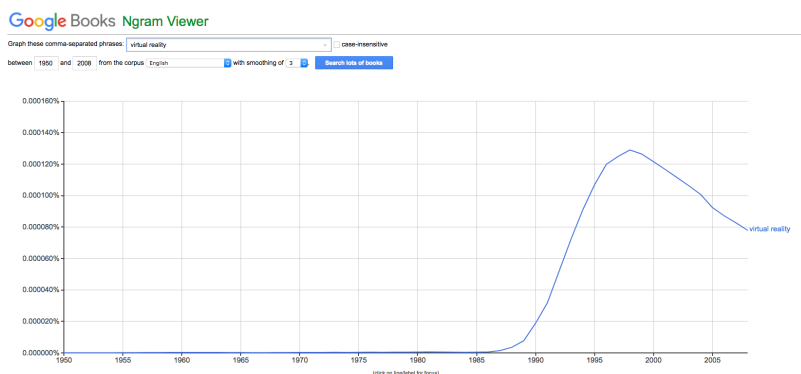
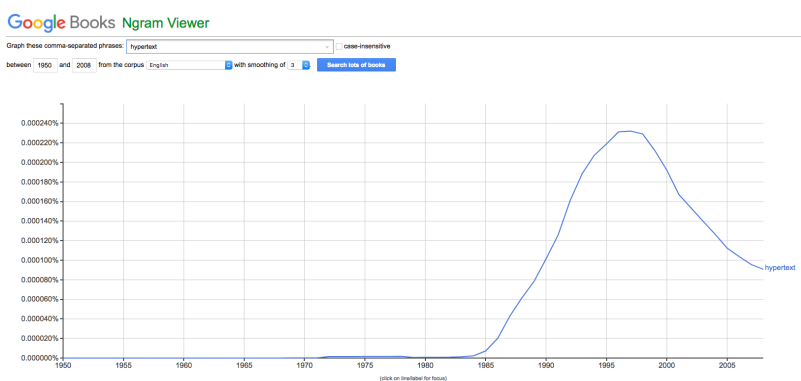*Fig. 3 – Ngram research for 'virtual reality' (01 July 2019)*

Fig. 4 – Ngram research for 'hypertext' (01 July 2018)

However, other cybercultural concepts like 'virtual community' (Fig. 5), very popular in the 1990s, followed a different path: their life cycle extended into the 2000s. In this case, the emergence of social networking sites (Haboo was launched in 2000, Delicious, Linkedin and MySpace in 2003, Orkut, Flickr and Facebook in 2004, Twitter in 2006, etc.) lengthened the life cycle of the idea of 'virtual community', a concept also popularized by Rheingold in his book *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* published in the early 1990s (Rheingold, 1993).
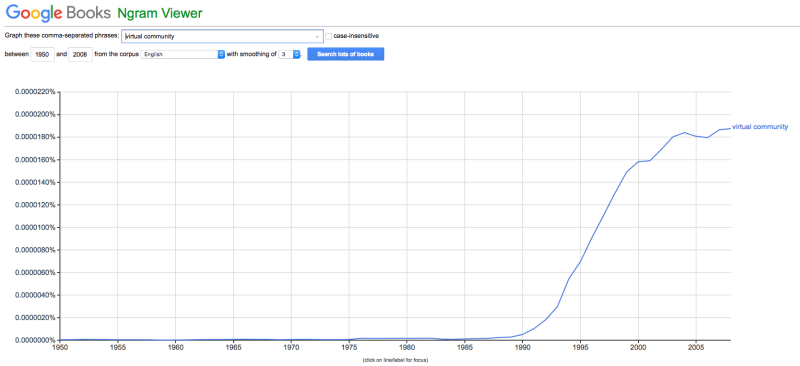
Fig. 5 – Ngram research for 'virtual community' (01 July 2019)

To conclude this short introduction to the life cycles of cybercultural concepts, it could be useful to look at the appearance of new concepts that displace the old ones, for example 'web 2.0' (Fig. 6), a term introduced by Tim O'Reilly in a conference held in San Francisco in October 2004 (http://conferences.oreillynet.com/web2con/) and later popularized in an article (O'Reilly, 2005).
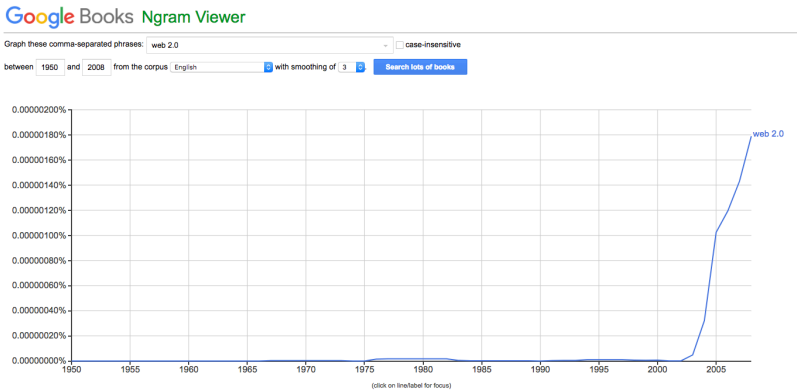

Fig. 6 – Ngram research for 'web 2.0' (01 July 2019)

As it can be seen, concepts come and go, following popularity cycles. In the digital environment these cycles seem to be very accelerated: a concept has a useful life that rarely exceeds a decade. Although the concept of 'transmedia' is not directly linked to digital technological development – transmedia narratives have existed throughout the 20th century (Freeman, 2016) – it is convenient to take into account the evolution of cybercultural concepts when we analyse it.

3.2. The life cycle of 'transmedia'

As it has already be seen, the first appearances of the concept of 'transmedia' were in the 1960-1970s, both in media educational and professional circuits, and its popularization started in the 1990s (Kinder's 'transmedia intertextuality') and exploded in the 2000s with Jenkins's 'transmedia storytelling'. Google Ngram Viewer represents this path of increasing dissemination very well (Fig. 7).
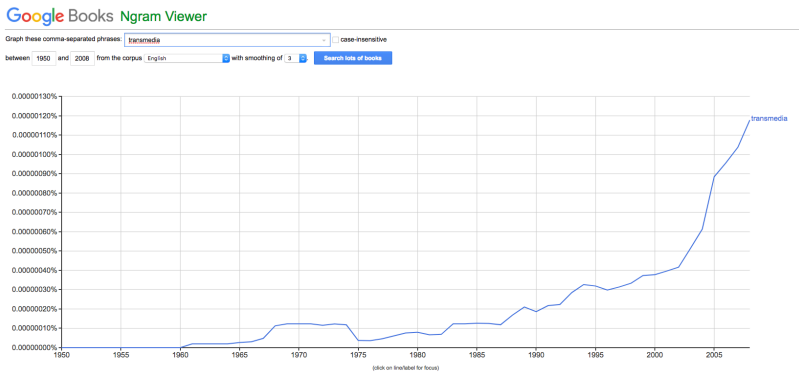

Fig. 7 – Ngram research for 'transmedia' (15 September 2019)

The visualization of the top substitutions produces the following image (Fig. 8). Two important combinations emerge: 'transmedia intertextuality' and 'transmedia storytelling'. The first one shows a popularity curve in the 1990s and them remains stable later on; the second one is consistent with the definitive popularization of the concept after Jenkins' main publications dedicated to 'transmedia storytelling' in 2003 and 2006.
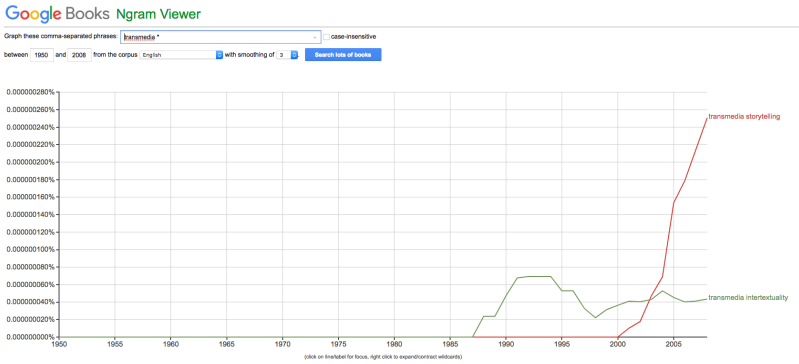
Fig. 8 – Ngram top substitutions for 'transmedia' (15 September 2019)

To conclude this section, it can be helpful to visualize a couple of concepts that are very close to 'transmedia storytelling'. If talking about 'transmedia storytelling' means talking about a narrative that expands through different media with the complicity of the users, it could be interesting to check the popularity of 'user generated content' (Fig. 9) and 'fanfiction' (Fig.10). As it can be seen, the two concepts share the same upward curve.
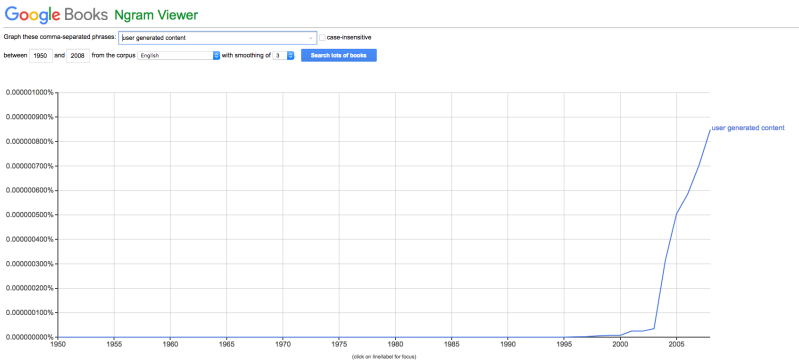

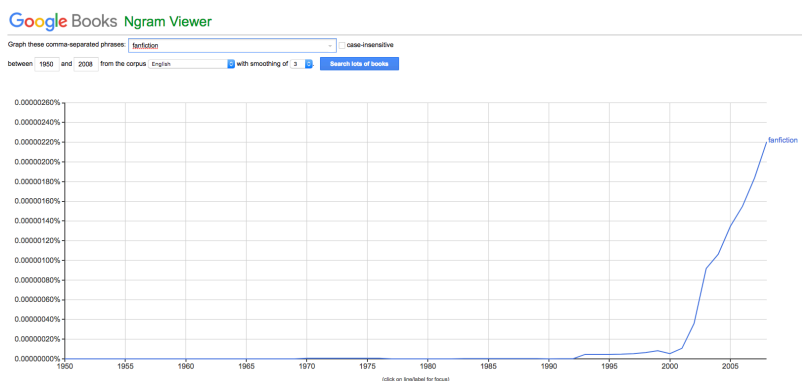*Fig. 9 – Ngram research for 'user generated content' (15 September 2019)*

Fig. 10 – Ngram research for 'fanfiction' (15 September 2019)

After this exploration of the popularity of the different concepts, it is possible to reflect on their life cycle and, specifically, on the evolution of 'transmedia'. The next section introduces these reflections and presents some hypotheses about the future evolution of the concept.

4. Conclusions: beyond 'transmedia'

What will the future evolution of the concept of 'transmedia' be like? Considering the evolution of very similar concepts – such as 'multimedia' – that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, and taking into account its uses and abuses both in academic and professional circuits, it would not be so surprising that the concept ends up being abandoned for other new words.

In the specific case of the professional uses, if all of the media companies produce and 'sell' transmedia storytelling, then in a few years the same companies will need new concepts to differentiate themselves in an overcrowded market. From this perspective, the concept of 'transmedia' may follow the same path as 'multimedia' twenty years ago. In this context, media companies (from the big corporations to the individual production units) will look for new concepts to differentiate what they offer and gain visibility in the market. New concepts like 'immersive narrative' or 'narrative experience' – in the line of 'user experience' or 'UX' – could be possible substitutes in the highly competitive media production market.

In academic and scientific circuits the situation is different: the life cycle of concepts is longer than in professional markets. Although in social sciences there are fashionable concepts ('sign' or 'structure' in the 1960s, 'text' and 'discourse' in the 1980s, etc.), the concept of 'transmedia',

like 'hypertext' or 'multimedia', should last longer than in professional circuits. It would not be so strange that in 20 or 30 years there are still PhD students developing theses about 'transmedia storytelling' or 'transmedia documentary', in the same way that today researchers still apply the concept of 'hypertext' developed by Nelson and Bush half a century ago.

However, the discussion about new concepts beyond 'transmedia storytelling' could be refreshing for scientific conversations. Is 'transmedia storytelling' the best way of naming these collaborative narrative practices? Should researchers talk about 'transmedia storytelling' or 'transmedia narrative worlds'? These questions could direct the conversation to collateral issues like: Is 'transmedia storytelling' a process or a textual product? Jenkins introduced this idea in 2007:

> Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story (Jenkins, 2007)

If 'transmedia storytelling' is a process that leads to the creation of 'transmedia narrative worlds', then it could be considered as a branch of design: 'transmedia narrative design'. This new conception of narrative creation, far from the writing tradition, would make it possible to recover many ideas and processes from different disciplines and professional fields – from Architecture to Design Thinking – and integrate them with the more traditional contributions of semiotics, narratology and literature studies.

As it can be seen, the analysis of the life cycle of concepts is not only a crucial issue for professionals who must differentiate themselves in an overloaded market: if theories emerge from conversational networks (Scolari, 2008), then it is also useful for scholars to reflect on the concepts that they use in everyday scientific conversations.

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