



Challenging the Forcefield: Crafting Entertainment-Education Transmedia Campaigns

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As media platforms have increased and become more complex, crafting entertainment-education (EE) interventions has become an even more challenging process. In essence, “the multi-device, multi-platform, multiple-media environment that many media users inhabit today as digital natives means that basic conceptual definitions such as media, audience, and effects are in flux” (Ramasubramanian & Banjo, 2020, p. 2). Moreover, audiences

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live in societies marked by socioeconomic and political inequities, disparities in access, and structural barriers. Given this backdrop, we use the critical media effects (CME) framework to analyze a transmedia EE intervention and highlight our learnings for the field.

Transmedia describes the use of multiple different media channels to tell stories in ways that allow for greater audience engagement and participation. “Part of the art of transmedia storytelling, then, involves the meaningful chunking of bits of narrative information to ensure that each segment is meaningful on its own terms but also involves the development of a blueprint for how the parts fit together so that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts” (Jenkins, Lashley, & Creech, 2017, p. 1065). In the context of EE, this implies building a coordinated story world across different media platforms to better engage the audience and leverage narrative elements to create a cohesive experience (Wang & Singhal, 2016). What sets contemporary transmedia initiatives apart from traditional multi-channel EE campaigns is the changing nature of storytelling and universe building across platforms. The capacity to move seamlessly across media platforms, reinventing the central idea to be platform- and output-specific without merely translating the same message or content (as is common in traditional advertising campaigns), is a new technological affordance, and we are only at the start of the journey to leverage this and grapple with its unfolding challenges.

CASE STUDY: *ADHAFULL*

To address crosscutting gender and adolescent issues on rights, education, nutrition, and health, UNICEF partnered with BBC Media Action in India to develop a large-scale transmedia intervention in 2015–2017. The formative research by the BBC Media Action team revealed the guiding insight that the lives of Indian adolescents were inhibited by a forcefield of social expectation (Pasricha, Mitra, & Whitehead, 2018). These normative boundaries, enforced by family, peers, neighbors, teachers/mentors, and society in general, shape their lives, ambitions, relationships, and their very identities. Many of the prevailing inequitable gender and social norms are rarely questioned. Thus, the intervention’s goal was to encourage the target audience to question these inequitable norms and power relationships, break through a culture of silence and compromise, and rethink their autonomy and gendered stereotypes.

The intervention featured a 78-episode EE television program, *AdhaFULL* (a Hindi-English word for half-full that the main characters

adopt to describe their team). The show used a mystery genre in which three adolescents (Kitty, Tara, and Adrak) worked as detectives to solve crimes each week. For example, in the first week, the trio joined forces to expose a con-artist while also challenging Kitty's parents' goals of arranging her marriage before she was legally old enough to marry. Following traditional EE theory, the show incorporated positive role models and highlighted transitional characters who became more supportive of gender equality over time. *AdhaFULL* becoming the highest-rated TV show on *Doordarshan* (the national television channel) averaging more than one million viewers per episode. A randomized experiment in which boys and girls watched either *AdhaFULL* or a control television drama showed that boys who watched *AdhaFULL* had greater self-efficacy and more support for gender equity than boys who watched the control (Frank et al., [under review](#)). Additionally, qualitative focus groups with youth and in-depth interviews with their parents provided insight into viewer engagement.

On *AdhaFULL* one key aspirational role model was the schoolteacher Roshni, who hosted a radio show as RJ Nikki. The second transmedia platform was a cross-over radio show, *Full On Nikki*, that in contrast to the fictional television narrative, used real-life role models, celebrities, experts, and rock bands. The radio show created a link between fiction and reality. Additionally, an interpersonal communication toolkit, created specifically for more rural and media dark audiences, included all the television show episodes with accompanying discussion guides about *AdhaFULL* for viewer clubs, ten graphic novels featuring *AdhaFULL* characters, and an activity book to help younger adolescents negotiate gender issues.

For audiences with digital access, a complimentary Android phone game app, *Nugget*, personified the pressure points in an adolescent's life as subsequent levels of a game. The game featured animated arms that echoed characters from the television show who restrict adolescent autonomy. Players had to swipe past the arms to make it to the next level. *Nugget* was downloaded more than 115,000 times. Finally, to engage urban youth, the transmedia intervention employed a social media hashtag, #BHL (#BigdiHuiLadki/Ladka—girl/boy gone bad). Saying a girl has gone bad is a judgment frequently deployed against girls. For the intervention, #BHL was introduced by Kitty in a video on social media and the popular youth portal, *Youth ki Awaz*. Kitty reclaimed the phrase to describe herself and celebrated it as indicating she had a mind of her own. Audience members were encouraged to share their own stories on challenging traditional gender norms. In this way, #BHL opened new possibilities and

invalidated older descriptions of what was unacceptable. The design embedded several “conversation starters”—social media videos/graphics created to elicit narratives—released purposefully throughout the social media campaign and featured fictional characters and real-life celebrities. These videos promoting #BHL reached more than 2.3 million people (Pasricha et al., 2018). However, challenges in budgeting and designing a comprehensive evaluation of all aspects of transmedia limit the claims about the overall, combined intervention effectiveness.

CRITICAL MEDIA EFFECTS FRAMEWORK

The critical media effects (CME) framework proposed by Ramasubramanian and Banjo (2020) works to bridge the communication subfields of media effects and critical cultural communication. In particular they propose the concepts of *power*, *intersectionality*, *context*, and *agency* as central pillars of the framework. Although they forwarded this theoretical framework after the intervention period, we find it meshes with the key concepts—agency, autonomy, identity, and relationship—which guided the creative team in conceptualizing the design of *AdhaFULL*. Thus, we use CME to guide us in examining what we learned from conducting a transmedia EE intervention.

The first pillar of the CME framework, power, highlights that different groups in society hold varying levels of power. This asymmetry shows up in how media represents people and also in how scholarship reinforces such hierarchies. In particular, the CME perspective acknowledges that “meaning construction and dominant discourses are often shaped by powerful media institutions and members of society who hold class privilege, political capital, and ideological influence” (Ramasubramanian & Banjo, 2020, p. 7). For the creative team, acknowledging these power differentials was important, including their own positionality *vis a vis* the audience. Before beginning content development, they conducted in-depth qualitative research to understand the context, the power relationships, and the normative discourse about gender roles which shape the adolescent audience’s lives.

The second key concept in the framework is that of agency, which accounts for audiences actively responding to and participating in media, rather than simply passively receiving it (Ramasubramanian & Banjo, 2020). This conceptualization of agency is particularly well-suited to transmedia interventions, as it builds on Jenkins’ ideas about production

of media by consumers and sharing through social media (Jenkins & Deuze, 2008). The team took a nuanced approach to understand the active ways in which different adolescents engage with diverse forms of media. Understanding adolescent agency and impacting their sense of identity through the transmedia intervention were key project goals. While not all media platforms lend themselves equally to participatory frameworks, the social media campaign, hosted on an interactive youth platform, was designed to amplify adolescent voices and allow the audience to reflect on restrictive gender norms encountered in their own lives. Similarly, the radio show was designed to explicitly bring in real-life role models and voices.

The third pillar of the framework is context and recognizes that multiple levels of context, from the viewing environment to the political structures and cultural norms, influence how media affect audiences. For instance, the intervention explicitly aimed to spark dialogue, as previous work has shown the importance of talking about campaigns in enacting social and behavior change (Chatterjee, Bhanot, Frank, Murphy, & Power, 2009; Frank et al., 2012). The entire intervention was designed with a deep cultural understanding of not only the socio-political, familial context of gender issues in India, but specifically the context of adolescent life. As part of this process, the creative team was composed of people who reflected the same cultural milieu. Diversity in the composition of the creative team was thus an important element of ensuring authenticity and audience engagement.

The fourth conceptual pillar is intersectionality or acknowledging the “overlapping and mutually constructed intersectional identities dynamicity of sociocultural political factors which impact the media experiences” (Ramasubramanian & Banjo, 2020, p. 6). Simply put it is the need to account for multiple grounds of identity to understand the lived experience (Crenshaw, 1991) of our intended audiences. In other words, the intervention couldn’t examine gender alone; instead, gender inequities also overlapped with inequities around age, location (rural or urban), and caste. An intersectional approach was integral to unpacking the web of privilege and marginalization that surrounds these adolescents and shapes their autonomy. For example, while young boys may have low autonomy with respect to choices in their careers (deferring to the wishes of their parents), they are very often in a privileged gender position compared to their female peers. Within the household, this further translates into hierarchical relationships between brothers and sisters, with brothers often

surveilling and enforcing strict gender norms on their sisters as a culturally acceptable and encouraged practice. Nuances with respect to intersections of gender marginalization coupled with economic marginalization (poverty) or social marginalization (caste) also formed necessary backdrops to exploring and raising the issue of adolescent rights and well-being through this intervention. Although not all aspects of social positions could be explored in depth, many of these were woven in as minor and major storylines on the television and radio show. For instance, while caste-based discrimination was not a central theme, one story arc on the television program dealt with the issue of students being discriminated against by a teacher based on caste, which the *AdhaFULL* trio help reveal and resolve.

BREAKING THE FORCEFIELD

The metaphor of challenging the forcefield guided the design and implementation of the *AdhaFULL* intervention. However, that metaphor is equally apt in thinking of the constraints on EE production and evaluation. In adopting a transmedia approach, the team attempted to challenge the norms that constrain traditional EE models.

(Re)Designing the Grant

The transmedia journey begins with the design of the grant and the response to a call from the funders. In the case of *AdhaFULL*, we reimagined a call for a communication intervention with multiple components as a transmedia intervention building a narrative world through varied platforms. The original request for proposals (RFP) was focused on adolescent and menstrual health, but in responding to it, the team reimagined its scope in form and content, addressing key adolescent challenges of growing up in a deeply gendered society and the related systemic issues including gender stereotyping and socialization, gender-based violence, and silence around menstruation, and other health issues. An RFP itself thus comes with its own opportunities and limitations, and proposing a transmedia project needs rethinking from the ground-up, stretching the opportunities while simultaneously working within the limitations.

Transmedia initiatives give an unparalleled opportunity to create a rich story world. Yet the ambitions across outputs and platforms have to be tempered with critical evaluation of where and how to use available resources. If we have five components in our transmedia basket, are we

adequately resourced to optimally implement all five things? Relatedly, does our design allow for us to be able to measure whether each of these components has worked individually as well as additively? The crux of a transmedia show is to be able to create a complex, yet unified universe. As we evolve in our use of transmedia, the next challenges for the field are to evolve our resource allocation, implementation plan, and research design to account for this complexity.

Further, we have to align our creative freedoms to lived realities. As development practitioners, we have to anticipate how far we can push the envelope with respect to the wish-list and expectations of funders and the people implementing the project. Similarly, in the narrative outputs, when dealing with entrenched social norms resistant to change, how far can we push the creative envelope and lead our audience to re-examine everyday life, yet keep them engaged?

(Re)Imagining the Audience

Where previous generations of EE were typically broadcast in contexts with one or two dominant media outlets, very often state-owned media (Chatterjee, Sangalang, & Cody, 2017), the reality today, whether broadcasting in the Global North or the Global South, is a fragmented audience and multiplicity of media outlets. *AdhaFULL* faced a similar challenge. There were multiple audiences for the *AdhaFULL* intervention: the adolescent age group was divided into younger and older adolescents, and differing social axes of gender, location (rural/urban), class, and caste. These stratifications have a significant impact on who has access to which media (including issues of digital inequities) and what genre of programming and platforms would appeal to which audience. The variety and disparities embedded in the audiences required thinking through each component. For *AdhaFULL*, the solution was a grid that mapped the rural/urban divide with age and access disparities (see Fig. 16.1). The target groups were not equally accessing all platforms. Here the early intersectional framework and understanding of the audience allowed for strategic leveraging of each component of the intervention. In other words, different components need to talk to different people.

Contextual understanding and audience feedback were incorporated through the human-centered design process that the team followed in developing the different components. For example, for the mobile phone game, boys in India have easier access to smartphones and data plans than

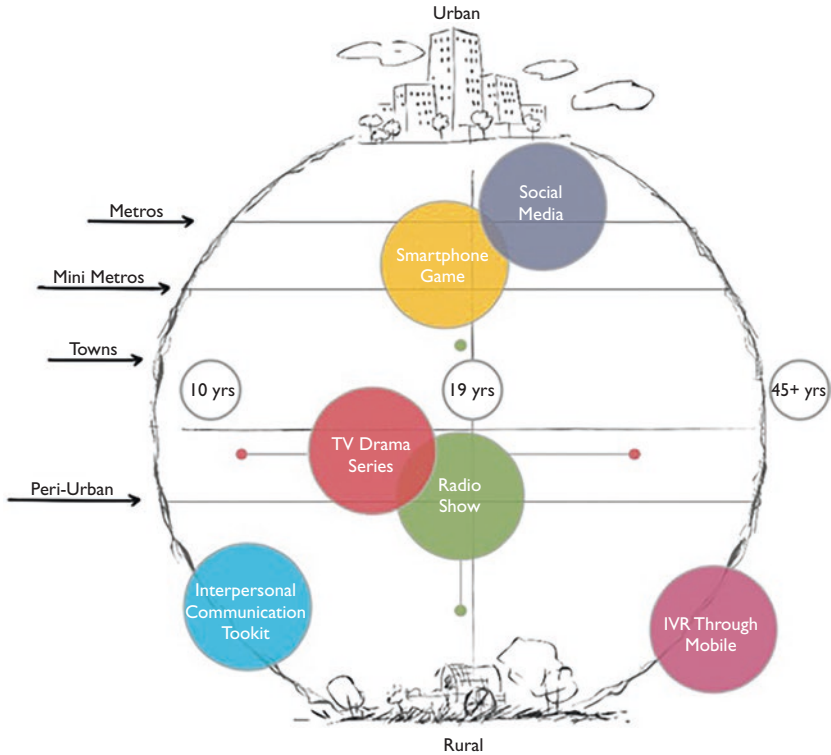


Fig. 16.1 Transmedia axes: age by geography (Pasricha et al., 2018)

girls, and there are age differences as well. Adolescent phone use is typically on a shared family device, and they have limited choice about time spent on the phone, use of data, and storage. All of these were important design considerations in developing the game to be simple yet engaging, freely downloadable, with little space, data, or time required to play. Understanding the context of media use in this population was crucial to the success of the game with its intended audience.

Together with mapping the media use of the audiences, we also identified the central themes that would remain consistent across the varying outputs and the different platforms building the cohesive story—world. These themes needed to be consistent, but also to be refreshed for each platform. Here, we broke down the challenges the adolescents faced with

relation to gender norms into the central narrative themes of agency, autonomy, identity, and relationship curtailed within the forcefield of social expectations.

Planning, Planning, Planning

The design and implementation of a transmedia intervention have to go together, like an orchestra led by a master conductor with each instrument coming in at the correct time and following the overall tone and tempo to allow for a rich, complex symphony to emerge. This is quite challenging. An innovative tool was created by the team in response to the complex planning needs of the transmedia intervention. The team devised a matrix—dubbed the Dashboard—to guide content development and monitor coverage of topics across the media components. This one-stop document synchronized research, content development, program management, monitoring, and evaluation. Structurally, it was organized and color-coded to map the central themes, intended audiences, goals of the intervention/platform, objectives (indicators to guide evaluation), as well as other research and creative inputs needed for decision making against each other. The narrative could vary but the core issue being addressed, why it is problematic, and what could be done about would be consistent by using the Dashboard as a touchstone. This living document helped keep track of the evolution of the intervention and the various components in real time. Its flexibility allowed for both a big picture overview and the minutia planning of an episodic story arc, contributing to the cohesiveness of the intervention.

Adapting on the Go

One of the biggest challenges was implementing the intervention. However, potential problems became an opportunity for innovation and creative problem-solving. For instance, the original plan, as developed with the funder, was to partner with the government-owned radio broadcaster. However, when the original partnership plans did not come to fruition, the team had to look for alternate platforms. As a solution, we moved to community-based radio platforms and state-owned school networks. Changing the radio partners necessitated shifting the timing of the pieces, with the radio platform rolling out in a staggered manner rather than timed with the television program. Notwithstanding the immense effort,

it took to identify and implement this alternative, in hindsight it ultimately enabled the radio program to be played across 30 community radio stations, 11 private FM channels, and more than 15,000 schools, enhancing community engagement (Pasricha et al., 2018).

The social media campaign that evolved and proved highly successful with urban youth was another adaptation, as the original proposal did not have a separate social media campaign. A limitation of this component not being part of the original design meant that the hashtag could not be embedded in the TV drama, and the cross-reference worked only one way with the online campaign using characters and references to the television show. However, it also illustrates the strength of engagement and cross-over audiences across platforms. The social media content that got the most views (2.5 million on YouTube) and engagement was the one that featured the central protagonists from the show, evidencing the popularity and resonance of these characters with the audiences (for comparison, some of the other social media pieces featured famous celebrities like movie star and UNICEF ambassador Priyanka Chopra). For transmedia interventions, the cross-over of format and ideas is thus very important to realize the potential of a rich story universe.

One of our fundamental lessons is that platform choices come with unexpected or unanticipated curve balls beyond the control of the team. Multiple platforms inherently mean multiple challenges. Each media platform will have its own regulations, market logic, structural advantages and disadvantages, and much of it changes as technologies and regulations evolve in real time. Thus, EE creators will find themselves working with multiple regulatory bodies and media markets, adding further nuance and complexity to the need to understand audience media ecology. Rigorous planning and execution are fundamental to success, but so is flexibility.

THE FORCEFIELD PUSHES BACK

Media has the power to craft parallel new realities. When they endorse these new norms, audiences are able to redefine their own attitudes and views and begin to create social change. However, pushing boundaries on social norms and challenging entrenched hierarchies through our interventions is never without creative and other forms of pushback. Looking back critically at the limits to creative license, walking the fine line between provocation for the audience without alienating or violating expectations, we identify instances where it was not possible to depict the issues in a

manner which subverted existing norms completely. To that extent, the social forcefield equally constrains and limits the boundaries of where our narratives can go. For instance, on the issue of gender-based violence, we wanted to depict the issue in more depth and in a gritty, stark manner in the TV series. However, the bounds of what would be acceptable to the audience and broadcast partners led to a less provocative tone and more implicit depiction than the team originally intended. Similarly, issues of teenage romance with respect to sexual and reproductive health choices, although touched upon, were not explored in a comprehensive manner, as these were deemed culturally sensitive. Thus, the agency and autonomy of the EE content creators are similarly circumscribed by socio-political-economic concerns in much the same way as those of the audiences for whom we create our interventions.

We recognize that some of these structural challenges also arise from the limited time of such an intervention. While the transmedia intervention set up an ambitious story—world—and created the foundation for the evolution of the complexity of the characters and issues, the reality of funding cycles left much of this potential unrealized. There were other aspects of gender inequality, including going beyond a binary understanding of gender or delving deeper into intersectional aspects of gender in the Indian context, which could have been addressed had program and budget plans permitted. The ability of a media intervention to engineer viewer engagement—especially when dealing with complex issues and entrenched norms which defy any easy solution and immediate behavior change—gets undermined when it meets the reality of short-term interventions and budgetary constraints. In contrast with commercial programs, loyalty and ratings do not necessarily translate into additional seasons and show renewals. Paradoxically, while normative change needs sustained engagement, project cycles don't always allow for it. Funding power hierarchies dictate much of what potential is realized and what is not.

LESSONS LEARNED AND BEST PRACTICES

As we learn from this project, in recognizing and challenging the boundaries we encounter, we create the space for reimagining our work and look toward the future. To sum up, we pose a series of questions for the field and ourselves. We see the attempt to answer these questions as forging pathways for new boundary-pushing work on transmedia EE interventions.

The first question is the need to think about **how to theorize transmedia interventions**. Do our existing theoretical models adequately capture the scope of transmedia interventions? More importantly, drawing from the CME framework, can we think beyond individual-level behavior change to allow us to incorporate issues of social context, power hierarchies, and intersectional marginalization? Do our intervention designs account for audience agency and resistance and counter-narratives? While our designs and platforms are becoming increasingly complex, many of our theoretical models don't allow for capturing these kinds of nuances and look largely toward discrete behavior change. When dealing with complex social issues, we may need to go beyond behavior change and traditional media effects models. Conversely, there are existing theoretical concepts which remain underutilized and under-theorized in the field of EE. For instance, interpersonal discussion becomes especially important in the intertextual context of transmedia interventions. *AdhaFULL* was not just about what happens to individuals—real or imagined—but also about lived, everyday social and cultural reality and challenging the ideologies underpinning it. The evaluation methodologies we typically adopt do not respond to easily capturing findings of this level of nuance or abstraction.

Second, we need to reconsider how we conceptualize the **design and funding of transmedia projects**. Short-term funding cycles impact the nature and scope of such projects. The value from creating an elaborate story world is not optimized when it doesn't align with design goals. Fundamentally, transmedia approaches use more than multiple platforms; they also imply multiple audiences. Not everyone sees all components of a transmedia intervention. That means that the expectations of funders with respect to audience and messaging may not always find a fit with the transmedia approach. Here we also acknowledge the power dynamics that play out among not only the audience and the content creators but also the funding partners, implementors, research team, and creative teams—all of which continue to shape how the field evolves.

Finally, a key question which enfolds both the previous questions relates to **how we effectively evaluate transmedia interventions**. At one level, it leads us to questions of how do we define exposure in the context of a transmedia intervention. While the transmedia approach allows us to tailor and respond to the issue of fragmented audiences and multiple platforms, it still begs the question of how we allow for this same complexity to be reflected in our theoretical and evaluation models. Within the broader field of development, experiments are currently in the spotlight. Yet,

experiments by nature are designed to minimize internal variability and look for direct, causal relationships. How then do we design our evaluation research to account for nuances embedded in socio-political contexts and the myriad pathways through which social change takes place? As Green (2021) notes, snapshot experiments cannot fully capture change that happens over time. To assess differing engagement and impact of the various components of a transmedia intervention, we must plan for a complex evaluation that meets audiences where they actually use media and is tied directly to the planning of the overall intervention.

As social change practitioners, storytellers, and researchers embedded in the *AdhaFULL* universe, taking this self-reflexive analytical journey allowed us to examine the limits of our own agency in doing this work and to assess the societal, institutional, organizational, and external boundaries we needed to adhere to or break through in our quest to advocate for social change. We hope these learnings encourage our readers and fellow EE enthusiasts to continue to challenge and innovate beyond the boundaries of EE and transmedia as we know them today.

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