Branding Media Content: From Storytelling to Distribution

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Abstract

In the context of production, it is sometimes claimed that content development and creation could and should learn from branding. I will argue that essentially it is the other way round. When content creation has been made more standardized the content becomes "brandable". Subsequently, branding handbooks and marketers are adopting simplified concepts of storytelling. In this sense, branding can be regarded as the commercialized version of standardized storytelling. Changes in the value chain of media production and distribution lead to the question of who shall be responsible for branding. Drawing from a study with audiovisual producers in Europe, it is illustrated that producers are reluctant to accept the branding of content as part of their changing job role. Thus, it is concluded that actually the content should not be branded at all, but rather that the distribution should be.

Keywords

Formulaic storytelling • Periodic table of storytelling • Content brand • Distribution brand • Wholesale brand • Branding competences

1 Formulaic Storytelling as Content Branding

Deriving from the available 'how-to literature' in screenwriting, one could assume that screenwriting is not all that creative. Some follow the idea of Campbell's (1949) and Vogler's (1992) "monomyth" (Clayton, 2007), that traces all stories back to one culturally universal quest of a hero. This hero is reluctant when he gets the call to adventure, but then he is encouraged by a mentor. He has to fight enemies

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to eventually reach the innermost cave where he receives the (material or immaterial) elixir that can solve the problem. Conclusively, the hero must make sure that this gift reaches his home world to restore order. Others believe that the monomyth can be differentiated further. They identify certain patterns such as the three-act structure (Field, 1984; McKee, 1997; Root, 1979), that can be traced back to Aristotle. McKee furthermore relates to Goethe's seven topic matters, Polti's (1895) list of 36 dramatic situations and Metz's (1968) eight syntagmas. Other authors forgo high profile testimonials and simply list "master plots" (Tobias, 1993) or "master characters" (Schmidt, 2001) which have proven successful.

In some respect, screenwriting textbooks thus resemble journalism textbooks: the guidelines for novices of the profession are the result of content analysis distilling successful elements of existing content. In that context master plots can be regarded as analogous to news values (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Lippmann, 1922). On the one hand they reproduce professional standards; on the other hand they indicate consumer demand. Since recipients have also learned what to expect, both from news and from fiction, patterns of news values and story elements are self-perpetuating.

From this perspective, screenwriting resembles a package deal at a fast-food restaurant. Writers can choose a burger, a side, a salad and a beverage. They do have options as they can choose between e.g., 10 burgers, four sides, three salads and 10 beverages, and they can even choose their favorite sauce and decide whether they want ice in their drink. However, it will always be a fast food menu. In terms of storytelling this concept is taken to the extreme with the "periodic table of storytelling" (Harris, 2014). In analogy to the periodic table of chemical elements Harris list 176 story elements, such as 21 different heroes, 28 villains or 14 structures. Taking the analogy with chemistry even further, he suggests every story could be represented as a molecule that is a combination of certain story elements. Just as in chemistry some elements go together well while others do not. Furthermore, some story elements are more popular than others, so Harris provides a proxy measure for their popularity. A writer hoping to maximize his or her audience can use this information and might create a popular "classic hero" to fight a popular "manipulative bastard" rather than an unpopular "tragic hero" struggling with an unpopular "obstructive bureaucrat" as antagonist.

Storytelling by the "chemistry book" clearly has its upsides. The task for the writers is somewhat easier, and the resulting stories are more accessible for the audience as well as for those people in the industry who decide which stories to produce and turn into a media product. Thus storytelling by the book fits well with a strategy of "high concept" production of stories that can easily be summarized, whose originality can be conveyed briefly, and that consequently can easily be marketed (Wyatt, 1994).

Over the years, this approach to storytelling has been criticized from two directions. In the tradition of Horkheimer's and Adorno's (1969) critique of the "culture industry" a first group of observers believe that high concept would lead to dull stories that reproduce stereotypes. The result would be a depleted narration because for producers it would get difficult to appreciate more innovative and complex projects (Kapur, 2005). "All novelty or originality is subsumed under the conventions informing all mass market cultural representations—film, television, journalism, politics—assurances that what is to be seen and heard is the simplest, least threatening, and most easily assimilable of what has been decided we need to know" (Kolker, 1988, p. ix).[1] A second route of criticism relates to a certain level of cultural imperialism since the proposed monomyth or story elements might not be completely culturally universal. Thus, storytelling by the chemistry book would result in a cultural closure excluding other potentially interesting and enriching perspectives (Clayton, 2007).

Essentially storytelling using patterns and tested concepts serves the same function as branding. It reduces complexity; it guides expectations and it addresses issues resulting from the experience good characteristic. Putting the commercial aspect first, the possibility space for stories is reduced. Of the 176 story elements put forward by Harris, quite a few could be considered 'box-office poison' and thus should be avoided by writers of mass-market content. Hence, from a branding perspective the number of useable elements is much smaller. Formulaic storytelling can be seen as about halfway between free creativity and the set elements in a brand bible.

The limited set of brandable story elements can be used to create "branded entertainment". This concept has been introduced as a possible solution both for the funding problems of media producers and for the problems of marketers to reach their bored audience. More generally speaking, narration has been rediscovered as a powerful way of conveying messages: journalistic (Früh & Frey, 2014), or political (Lilleker, 2014) as well as commercial. Thus, some observers believe advertising and entertainment would have to converge to survive (Baetzgen & Tropp, 2013; Donaton, 2004). While branded entertainment describes essentially the result of this convergence, the expression can be read from two perspectives. From the content perspective it is merely a new word for high concept formulaic storytelling. From the advertising perspective it is the continuation of product placement strategies, when the brand becomes part of the storyline or even the starting point of a story. In fact, the longer formats of branded entertainment allow for more complex story lines than those of 30 seconds spots. However, marketers will not make use of the whole spectrum of potential story elements but rather stick to a set of proven formulas.

Even beyond branded entertainment, the concept of storytelling using archetypes has gained much attention in the literature on marketing (Dietrich & Schmidt-Bleeker, 2013; Fog, Budtz, & Yakaboylu, 2005; Gutjahr, 2013, pp. 149ff), commercial communication (Hilzensauer, 2014; Littek, 2011; von Matt, 2008), and even as a general management tool (Denning, 2006; Thier, 2010; Wentzel, Tomczak, & Herrmann, 2012). Regularly in these approaches, the idea of mythic

[1] While this criticism is widely shared, some authors argue it would be disproportionate since other quality aspects would be neglected and the quality of the media products from comparative periods would be exaggerated ex post (Nelson, 2013; Schauer, 2007).

structures in brand stories is simplified. Fog et al. (2005, pp. 37ff) for example presents a "fairy-tale model" of storytelling with just six character templates and one standard storyline. Gutjahr (2013) claims that all good stories should have a happy ending. He lists 13 archetypes that would help turn the product, the company founder or the brand as a whole into myths consumers could be bound to. Dietrich and Schmidt-Bleeker (2013) describe that the advertising industry has perverted and reduced the concept of storytelling to the notion that boring marketing messages would become less annoying when wrapped into a story. To overcome this they suggest brands should not *tell* the story but should *be* the story told by consumers. While they acknowledge the power of the consumer to interpret the brand, still this means marketers have to work with a reduced set of potential narrative elements.

An abstract understanding of branding the content reveals that the concept is not new at all. Formulaic storytelling has been around since ancient times. The only new thing about it is that the scope of potential stories has been more and more reduced. When media content is branded, it necessarily has to become repetitive to some extent in order to allow for a reliable brand. When non-media brands become content providers (Rose, 2013) recipients (consumers) should not expect too much in terms of storytelling. At the end of the day, these companies want to sell products or services rather than stories.

But what about the producers? How do they perceive the concept of branding and how willing are they to engage in this? To answer these questions the following section will provide some insights from a study of audio-visual producers in Europe, who are quite reluctant to step up their efforts in terms of branding.

2 Branding Distribution or Branding the Content?

Media brands come in a great variety. Some media brands are *distributor brands*. These brands can promise ease of use in accessing more or less any content (e.g., *Amazon*, *Youtube*) or they can promise to offer a reliable service in selecting a certain flavor of content (e.g., special interest TV broadcasters such as *DMAX* in Germany). Siegert refers to this type of brands as "umbrella brands" (Siegert, 2001, pp. 142–144). A second type of media brand is the *wholesale brand* on the procurement market for distributors. If, for example, a German speaking TV broadcaster such as *RTL II* wants to buy the rights to Asian or Bollywood movies it will most likely turn to *RapidEyeMovies* which has built a strong brand as a rights trader in this segment. Finally, media brands can be *content brands*. In this case, a single show is the brand. Obviously one-off productions are less likely to become brands since there are no recurring elements that could become brand elements. Thus, branded content is most likely a series, a serial, a recurring show or a (movie) franchise. Alternatively, individual shows can become "temporary brands" or they can be bundled to "sequential brands" (Siegert, 2001, pp. 147–148).

These three types of media brands along the value chain point to the question: who should be in charge of creating and nurturing the media brand? Obviously, in the traditional value chain a production company cannot be in charge of the distributor brand as an umbrella brand. But possibly the distributor wants to have a say in the creation and management of the brand of shows he has commissioned. Esch and Langner (2003, pp. 250–251) identify the "rigor of the brand management" as the most important aspect of branding in supply chains.

Rigor can be achieved more easily if the procured product is fairly standardized and if the supplier is fully funded. In the relation of *RedBull* to the producer of the actual soft drink, as an example, these conditions are clearly met. However, the relationship between the TV broadcaster and TV producers shows all characteristics of a principal agent problem (Fröhlich, 2010, pp. 87–91). There is an inherent uncertainty in the process since the use value of the resulting product in not known by the time the contract is closed. The two have asymmetric information: while the broadcaster has more information about the potential audience, the producers have more information about the necessary aspects of the production process. They also have divergent objectives: while broadcasters want to maximize the audience, at least some producers also pursue creative or cultural goals (von Rimscha & Siegert, 2011). Furthermore, many broadcasters no longer fully fund a commissioned production. They allow the producers to retain certain rights, e.g., the rights to license the program abroad, but in return they only pay for a share of the budget. This reinforces the problem of divergent objectives. Besides potential artistic objectives, the producer has another reason to be distracted from the briefing of the broadcaster, since the demands of foreign markets might again differ.

Generally speaking producers are in a less powerful market position than distributors (Lantzsch, 2008; von Rimscha, 2008). While distributors can easily commission alternative producers, producers have to deal with the fact that the distributors constitute the bottleneck in the value chain. Therefore, even without the level of control and standardization as in the example of *RedBull,* distributors usually can enforce their will and brand when commissioning. The situation gets different when distributors buy the license to show ready-made content that a producer has created at his own risk. Here the influence on the producers is limited and only indirect. The rigor of the brand management in this case is executed through a thorough selection process and the proper marketing.

Added to this, in recent years the market structures of audiovisual production in Europe have changed considerably: (1) technological changes allow for faster and cheaper production and numerous alternative receiving devices have emerged. This could result in an empowerment of the producers who no longer completely rely on the distributors but can reach the audience directly using the internet as a means of content delivery. To do so successfully they would need to master the technology, but probably more importantly they would also need to match the broadcasters in terms of brand awareness among the audience. (2) Economic changes such as the mentioned retreat of the total buy-out contract have led to new financing structures. Thus, producers have to learn how to sell their product abroad and to do so to build brand awareness among potential buyers of program rights. (3) Regulatory changes at the European level (Audio-Visual Media Services Directive of the EU) have led to a convergence of advertising regulation towards a lowest common denominator.

Advertising formats integrated into the editorial content became legal; in some countries for the first time ever. Product placements could replace dwindling revenues for broadcasters from spot advertising; however, they could also serve as a means of production funding. When advertising is to be already included in the development phase of a production, the producers need to build brand awareness among the advertisers. In this context, brand awareness could replace quantitative performance figures since they are not available before a show has been aired. Taken together, changes in three different aspects of the market framework all result in a potential benefit from investments in branding activities on the part of production companies. But just because there is a potential, it is not necessarily utilized. While producers are proud of the creativity of their content, they often show considerable inertia in terms of organizational innovations. Therefore, the question for the following section is: how do producers rate the relevance of branding, and how are activities in this context embedded in the organization?

2.1 Methodology

Only a few studies have looked into the changing relationship between broadcasters and producers. Rott and Zabel (2009) have assessed different possible adaptations of the business model for production companies in Germany. Using interviews with industry representatives ($n = 41$) they found that broadcasters are willing to use new distribution technologies such as streaming. However, they do not want to share them with producers. If producers were willing to gain direct access, they would have to find new customers. Thus, broadcasters and producers become direct competitors. However, in her interviews with producers Przybylski (2010) found only limited interest of producers in self-distribution. There is some willingness to open up to advertising. Neither of the two studies have explicitly investigated the role of branding in potential business model adaptations.

Our study of European producers thus comprised aspects of the preparedness and the willingness for branding activities as well as business model changes and the necessity of dynamic capabilities (Naldi, Wikström, & von Rimscha, 2014; von Rimscha, Wikström, & Naldi, 2014).

We combined expert interviews with industry representatives ($n = 6$) with a standardized survey of managing directors of production companies in eight European countries including Croatia, Germany, Ireland, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. These countries represent different market sizes, different levels of concentration and broadband penetration and different regulatory traditions, where some countries (UK & IE) are regarded more producer friendly since they traditionally allow producers to retain more rights.

The production companies were identified using the membership database of the respective national industry associations. We generated 154 completed questionnaires out of 1,383 contacts (response rate 11.1 %). While the useable answers are somewhat skewed towards smaller companies with a larger share of one-off productions, the most important players in each market are represented.

2.2 Results

While the producers indicated that on average 12 % of the productions included some sort of advertising within the program, the producers did not actively promote this.

TV distribution is expected to stagnate (−0.1); growth is expected to derive from online (1.8) and mobile distribution (1.4 on a scale from −3 "strong decrease" to 3 "strong growth"). Despite this, producers are reluctant to invest and engage in any form of self-distribution. One German interviewee told us that even though his company is one of the biggest independent producers in his country, the output of his company alone would not be enough to stock their own branded online channel.

Furthermore, the results show that producers invest neither in a b2c brand profile towards the audience nor in a b2b brand profile towards the broadcasters or advertisers. Essentially, they want to keep doing what they perceive as their core competence: producing content. Changes in the industry structure mostly just mean exchanging old masters for new ones. Producers will provide their service for new players such as online aggregators rather than for broadcasters.

Productions without any funding from advertisers are predominantly (77 %) initiated by the producers themselves. In the rising number of advertiser-funded programs, the producers are gradually reduced to operating units with broadcasters and advertisers initiating 45 % of the shows. In terms of distribution, producers do not believe they can gain from self-distribution. They expect a market that is more competitive than the broadcasting procurement market they are used to. The expected beneficiaries of the development are telecommunication operators and online platforms and aggregators such as *Google* and *Apple*.

Producers are prepared to adjust their products to the needs of online distribution (e.g., shorter episodes) but they do not want to sell them on their own account. They lack either the equity capital or the will to take the risk of an unsolicited production. That said, the great majority (88 %) acknowledges that they have to adjust their business model in some way. For 42 % this includes the necessity of a marketing division, but 76 % hope to muddle through with ingenious all-rounders who are expected to contribute ever more skills to the company. Building a brand does not seem to be important to the producers.

Summarizing these results, we can see that (1) producers are somewhat skeptical of the concept of branding in the first place and (2) they consider it to be a marketing tool in the distribution of a finished product. We found no significant differences between the sampled countries.

2.3 Discussion

The findings suggest that in most of the European markets, producers have no experience in the marketing and distribution of their productions; they rather consider their core competence as creatively interpreting the brief for a commissioned production. The rejection of branding is sometimes not based on economic considerations for the best division of labor along the value chain, but rather grounded in divergent objectives. In the interviews, some producers reacted with incomprehension or rejection to the idea that the product itself could be a brand. Certainly, this is not representative of the industry as a whole, but it once again shows that even on the level of managing directors a creative and cultural motivation is an important counterpart to the motive of profit maximization.

From the producers' perspective, branding media content is a task for distributors. It is not so much about branding individual content but offering a reliable and predictable slate of content. If we reduce branding to this notion of coping with the challenges of an experience good, the question arises whether branding is a sustainable strategy for media distributor brands. Brands help to match audience expectations and content characteristics. However, brands are not the only means to do this. A powerful alternative are algorithms, as any user of streaming services can tell. After some initial training, the software is surprisingly good in suggesting audio or video content we might like. It is not perfect, but neither is the match between a brand and the audiences' taste. Especially when it comes to mass market content, content that tries to please most people most of the time, a brand does not seem very valuable anymore. The same matching performance can be achieved more easily and at lower cost, since programming an algorithm is faster and cheaper than building a brand. One of the advantages of brands for producers and distributors is that they create a distinction between two offerings that are more or less the same and thus justify a price premium. An algorithm debunks this distinction as superficial and thus reduces the value of a brand. Although an algorithm can also start with a random selection of content, it is usually more useful if the user provides some insight into his or her preferences.

The current situation, where producers just produce and broadcasters build a brand around commissioned and bought content, could thus be overthrown. In a new setting (1) distribution platforms would compete for the performance of their algorithms rather than for their brands and (2) producers would need to find a way to make their products known. Also for them branding would not be an option, because only if their product is different and new would they be recognized.

Thus, we can answer the question 'Who shall brand media content?' with two words: no one—at least in the context of entertaining audiovisual content. Distributors should save the money they spend on branding since algorithms are more efficient in fulfilling the need for matching content and audience interests. At the same time, producers should concentrate on their conventional core competences in creative production instead of trying to take over branding from distributors who do not benefit from it that much anymore.

3 Implications

The two aspects of media content branding presented in this chapter demonstrate the paradox of media branding. On the one hand branding is a strategy of differentiation. Companies use branding to differentiate themselves from competitors who offer almost the same products with limited quality difference. At the same time brands are meant to convey reliability and continuity. In the media business products do differ a lot in quality (no matter how it is defined) but there is a need for reducing uncertainty about the quality. On the distribution level of television, the situation is different. Since almost no broadcaster has any in-house production capacity for entertainment content, all broadcasters rely on the output of the same producers for commissioned or ready-made content. Therefore, on the distribution level differentiation through branding is needed to compensate for a limited differentiation in terms of content. However, on the production level there is no need to differentiate with a brand since the content needs to be different from that of the competitors anyway. The need for reliability and continuity does not have to be conveyed by a brand since in the "people business" (Manning, 2005) of TV production this is done by personal relations in networks. Branding in the production context could only be relevant if it is understood as a measure to create a corporate or network culture that guides internal or network processes (see Siegert, 2015). However, broadcasters expect producers to streamline their products to fit with their distributor brand. Thus the productions are getting ever more "high concept" and interchangeable and thus in turn reproduce the need to differentiate. In a way, media branding is trying to solve a problem which it recreates itself. If brands were not used to level out quality differences at the production level one would not need brands to create differentiation at the distribution level.

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