



# The Use of Social Media as Part of a Transmedia Storytelling Strategy in WWE's Professional Wrestling

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**Abstract.** This paper aims at exploring the ways social media and new technologies are currently used within professional wrestling and how this model is exploited to create transmedia storytelling strategies. The first chapter is an introduction to the world of professional wrestling and its main promotion, World Wrestling Entertainment. In the second chapter, the author focuses on the storytelling within wrestling, introducing the concept of kayfabe, highlighting similarities in narrative between wrestling and serialized drama, but also their differences, bringing out the active role of the audience in wrestling. Then, attention is paid to how WWE in particular has managed to succeed in transmedia storytelling, exporting its content from TV shows and live performances to a wide range of other media and products. Finally, before the conclusions, the author analyzes the different uses of social media within wrestling, arguing that they impact kayfabe and allow the audience to change scenarios and storylines.

**Keywords:** Professional wrestling · Social media · Transmedia storytelling

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 The World of Professional Wrestling

Professional wrestling is a sport/entertainment where athletes/actors (commonly referred to as wrestlers) play the role of characters, or personas, who mainly aspire to win one or more championship belts.

In other words, pro-wrestling “presents a simulacrum of grappling and combat sport practices with ancient roots, framed by serial narratives of rivalry, jealousy and deceit that present a moral universe often characterized in simplistic way” (Chow 2014).

To achieve their goal, in fact, characters follow different paths, depending on their own attitude: the good guy is called “babyface” and usually fights a “heel”, the bad guy. The babyface is therefore the embodied sign of “good” within the conventional “good versus evil” wrestling narrative (Barthes 1972). Following this scheme, wrestlers face rivalries (or feuds) with other characters of the same roster: feuds can arise because of simple dislikes, or because a wrestler has set off on another’s path, for example by stealing an opportunity, and generally involve betrayals and subterfuges by the heel.

Thus, the narratives behind the rivalries are considered one of the main reasons that can determine the success or failure of wrestling.

Feuds are eventually solved through fight matches in the ring, then wrestlers move on to the next rivalry.

The outcomes of the matches, and therefore of the feuds, are pre-determined by scriptwriters (known as bookers). So, unlike traditional sport, there is no real competition in wrestling. Or at least, the nature of this competition is very different from that found in traditional sports. Fights, as already said, “are woven into an on-going story about the individual wrestler and their interaction with the rest of the wrestling community” (Oliva 2009). In a traditional sport, the stronger fighter would win. In professional wrestling, to be the winner, performers need to show other features: they must play their role in the best possible way, a babyface must be loved by the crowd, while a heel must be hated. Those who succeed at this, usually are “pushed” by the promotion and have better chances to win and get close to the coveted championship belt.

The athletes/actors follow a general script in the spoken segments used to build up the matches, but they keep a significant share of freedom in the fight sequences.

The results of the matches and important events may be ordained by the bookers, but all of the time athletes spend in the ring engaged in a simulation of a competition is a negotiation between wrestlers. This custom is so ingrained that “there is also a certain type of standardized etiquette at work in these negotiations to build the flow of the match and its narrative points” (MacFarlane 2012). In this custom, the most skilled wrestlers generally make decisions while typically heels “call the spots”, through an improvised communication based on a shared terminology, and control the general flow of the match within the ring.

To this extent, professional wrestling has been sometimes compared to other forms of choreographed performance, such as dance. What is different, though, is that a wrestling match is responsive to the live audience. People attending the show do not know anything about how it will end, just as if the match was “real”. Wrestlers hear if fans cheer or boo and they can tailor the performance to those reactions, for example by speeding up the pace.

Still, fans who crowd the arenas to attend wrestling pay not to see a sport or a challenge, but a staged performance. “This has tended to outrage critics, who judge professional wrestling by its legitimacy as a traditional sport and thus painting professional wrestling as deceptive” (Oliva 2009). As Barthes argued this perspective trivializes the fictionality of professional wrestling: “There are people who think that wrestling is an ignoble sport. Wrestling is not a sport, it is a spectacle, and it is no more ignoble to attend a wrestled performance of suffering than a performance of the sorrows of Arnolphe or Andromaque” (Barthes 1972).

## 1.2 World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE)

As of 2019, the largest wrestling promotion in the world is Stamford’s based WWE, which holds over 500 events a year, and has a roster of athletes divided up into various globally traveling brands. The very name, World Wrestling Entertainment, already shows how important this combination of sport and entertainment is for the company.

Before 2002, the name of the company was World Wrestling Federation, but it was changed to emphasize its focus on entertainment (although mostly because of an unfavorable ruling in its dispute with the World Wildlife Fund regarding the “WWF” initialism).

World Wrestling Entertainment is now a publicly traded global media conglomerate that had an international audience and revenues of more than \$800 million in 2017.

The company consists of a portfolio of businesses that create and deliver original content 52 weeks a year to a global audience. WWE is committed to family friendly entertainment on its television programming, pay-per-view, digital media and publishing platforms. The award-winning WWE Network is the first-ever 24/7 direct-to-consumer premium network that includes all live pay-per-views, scheduled programming and a massive video-on-demand library, and is currently available in more than 180 countries.

WWE has also branched out into other fields, including movies, real estate, and various other business ventures.

Revenues reached \$188.4 million for the third quarter 2018 and a record \$657.7 million for the nine months ended September 30, 2018, representing 12% growth over the prior year period. Through the first nine months of 2018, digital engagement increased with video views up 61% to 22.9 billion and hours consumed up 81% to 842 million across digital and social media platforms (WWE Corporate, Investors).

Most notably, in addition to its original programming watched by more than 800 million homes worldwide in 25 languages (WWE Corporate, Who We Are), WWE’s far-reaching social media presence helps augment its programming and enhance the experience for viewers.

## 2 Professional Wrestling Storytelling

### 2.1 Kayfabe: What Is Real, What Is Fake

Storytelling is the most important element in decreeing the success or failure of wrestling. If a match doesn’t tell a story with a good psychology, the audience won’t be engaged and the business will suffer.

“The means by which matches are won fuel rivalries and keep the stories alive; the matches themselves are not the only focal point, but rather devices used to advance an intricately detailed plot” (Vargas 2007).

The whole narrative strategy of WWE is based on mimicking the sports world. Sam Ford calls WWE “the world’s biggest alternate reality game”, because it bases the story it wants to tell upon the rules of a sports federation, matching the place where the story takes place with the real world.

The glossary from *Steel Chair to the Head* (Sammond 2005) defines “kayfabe” as follows: “maintaining a fictional storyline, or the illusion that professional wrestling is a genuine contest”.

In other words, it is the “illusion of realness” (Smith 2006), the portrayal of competition, rivalries, and relationships between participants as being genuine and not of a staged or predetermined nature of any kind.

In general, anything in a professional wrestling show is subject to kayfabe, even though at times it is portrayed as real-life. Some of the wrestlers compete under their real name, but the character they portray, even if is called like them or incorporates some traits of their personality, does not correspond to the person who interprets it. The line between fiction and reality is very blurred. This is because almost always wrestlers remain “in character” even during their private life.

For this reason, wrestlers can never start completely from scratch in their narration, but are always tied to the progress of their character and their personal ability. In this sense, wrestling “identity” can be constructed, but it cannot necessarily be “faked” (MacFarlane 2012).

The nature of the “fake” in wrestling is complex and controversial. For example, the moves are adapted to minimize the impact and wrestlers know how to give or take a punch (relatively) safely, but the chances of painful injuries remain high. The intentional self-injury in order to draw blood, a common practice called “blading” or “getting color”, produces a real wound, even if it’s self-inflicted by a wrestler who “makes a small incision in his forehead using a razor hidden in the wrist cuff or taped to the fingers, out of view of the audience (for example, when holding one’s head after a blow from a steel chair that is meant to be the actual cause of injury)” (Chow 2014).

Arguably throughout its history and certainly since the 1990s, when wrestlers and promoters began to actively acknowledge kayfabe, everyone in the wrestling event is “keeping kayfabe”, cheering and booing as if the bouts were sportive rather than theatrical. However, with the advent of Internet, the pro-wrestling industry has become less concerned about protecting backstage secrets and typically maintains kayfabe only during the shows. Even then, kayfabe is occasionally broken, usually when dealing with genuine injuries during a match or paying tribute to wrestlers.

Nowadays, kayfabe is often broken when wrestlers go on tour. Feuding stars in storylines can be seen being civil to each other when they are not wrestling. Off-ring persona can be strikingly different from the in-ring character with less disapproval.

As a result, “today fans and audiences take pleasure in active collaboration in not only creating the kayfabe world but also in looking for ways of dissecting it” (Mazer 2005; Wrenn 2007).

## 2.2 Pro-wrestling and Drama

From another point of view, WWE’s pro wrestling can be interpreted as a big “soap opera” or dramatic series, and this is somehow confirmed by the management itself, as production studios, such as HBO, Fox and so on are considered as company’s main competitors rather than other wrestling federations.

WWE cares that its audience is interested not so much in the outcome of the fight, as in how it is narrated and represented. The importance of the performance is therefore crucial. Storylines are a fundamental part of today’s professional wrestling: WWE uses its weekly shows to tell storylines and resolves them or introduces major changes during monthly pay-per-views. “WWE wrestling therefore follows a similar narrative

structure to television series, with each match developing the relations between characters and pushing the story forward” (Oliva 2009).

This vision is reinforced by the kayfabe concept itself, since it is often seen as the suspension of disbelief that is used to create feuds, angles, and gimmicks, in a manner similar to other forms of fictional entertainment. In relative terms, a wrestler breaking kayfabe during a show would be likened to an actor breaking character on-camera.

As in a soap opera, the main plot is a continuous rise towards moments of tension that are then solved and pave the way for new climaxes, in cycles that are repeated, from season to season, in a model of “open” seriality.

The basic difference, of course, is that these conflicts in WWE are solved in the ring, and not in a courtroom or in a hospital, for example.

Moreover, as in a soap opera, the audience understands (or at least should) and accepts that what they see is not real. I say “should”, however, because, as said before, wrestling characters partly overlap to the people who interpret them, and this adds more realism to the story (or sometimes a sense of confusion).

The other huge difference is that pro wrestling is shot to be broadcast on TV in sports arenas, in the presence of a paying audience. Some soap operas are shot in front of a public, too, but pro wrestling is the only show of this kind in which the audience can be seen and heard and whose presence is acknowledged by performers. WWE’s audience can almost be considered as an additional character, since it can influence the course of events through its behavior, and indeed it is the most difficult to manage, because it is the only one that bookers can not fully control, as I am going to address in the following paragraph.

### 2.3 The Importance of Audience

Henry Jenkins defines fandom as the “social structures and cultural practices created by the most passionately engaged consumers of mass media properties” (Jenkins 2010). WWE broadly refers to its fandom as the “WWE Universe”.

Situated between sport and theatre, the WWE Universe and the audience in general have a “large and active role in the wrestling spectacle, participating as if the results of the matches were not determined before the performers enter the ring” (Chow 2014).

To clarify this concept and explain the importance of audience’s reactions, I refer to one of the major cases in recent years, occurred in 2014: the rise of the “Yes movement” lead by wrestler Daniel Bryan. At that time, Bryan was starting to gain space in the federation, but was considered by the WWE and by its on-stage bosses, Triple H and Stephanie McMahon (collectively known as “The Authority”), as a good loser or, to use their word, “a B + player”, not worthy of the main spotlight.

On the other hand, Daniel Bryan was the absolute favorite by the audience, because he was “a lanky, nervous pale kid with a goofy smile who brushes his hair forward and looks like he’s just happy to be there” and a guy everyone can relate to (Oglesby 2017).

People wanted to see Bryan winning the title, but The Authority thought it otherwise, and kept denying him chances.

The situation degenerated at Royal Rumble 2014, one of the major annual pay-per-views, in which thirty professional wrestlers toss each other over the top rope until only

one wrestler remains. The winner then goes on to headline *WrestleMania*, WWE's version of the Super Bowl.

Daniel Bryan, despite expectations, was ousted by the match and barred from the “nano-narrative” constituted within the particular match (Petten 2010; Jenkins 2014), which instead was won by Batista, the musclebound athlete chosen by WWE to be the main babyface.

The plans organized by the bookers were clear: Batista was going to challenge the heel champion Randy Orton at *WrestleMania*.

What WWE did not foresee, however, was the incessant, overwhelming booring coming from over 15,000 fans within the arena.

That was just the tip of the iceberg: this protest continued for months and its reasons are to be found both inside and outside of kayfabe. In fact, fans were hoping for triumph as a result of the “macro-narrative” involving Bryan (Petten 2010), but they suddenly realized that their underdog hero wouldn't have been able to overcome the odds and eventually carry out the “excessive spectacle of good triumphing over evil” (Barthes 1972).

Thus, the protest began both in the arenas and in virtual spaces, as I am going to explain later, and rapidly became impossible to ignore, leading to a change in the plans of WWE and the subsequent involvement of Daniel Bryan in the title match, which eventually culminated with his victory at *WrestleMania*.

This example shows how “wrestling audience members see themselves as co-performers. The fans can take action against unacceptable performances, even if it causes a narrative and social breach” (Oglesby 2017).

### 3 WWE Transmedia Storytelling

#### 3.1 Narrating Kayfabe Across Platforms

WWE's television shows are not broadcast every day like episodes of a soap opera, but the number of shows (different, but with intertwining narratives) is broad and is complemented by live performances not shot on camera, and thus become a daily appointment. And everything that does not go directly on television, promptly ends up on the Internet, on the company's website, on WWE's YouTube channel or on other social platforms, on the new monthly subscription platform called WWE Network.

Due to this, professional wrestling is by its nature a fantastic example of transmedia storytelling, thanks to the unique participation of the audience, which differentiates the product by a TV series or a book, for example.

Kayfabe usually extends beyond the physical space of the ring and the arena to the media around the event but, as I said, in the social media era this process has become difficult to manage.

Transmedia storytelling is the use of multiple platforms to tell a cohesive story, where each piece adds to the story to create a better overall story.

The transmediality (Jenkins 2003; 2004) of wrestling began in the 80 s, when some wrestlers became so popular that they could be compared to movie stars. The admixture

became even bigger when some television or film actors became part of the wrestling storylines by competing in some matches.

There is usually a degree of confusion between franchising and transmedia platforms since many franchises use techniques that mimic transmedia storytelling. For example, many large franchises have novel and video games adaptations of films. While this is an example of cross-platform storytelling, none of the pieces expand on the existing story, as it would be proper to transmedia storytelling.

WWE is a good example of both categories: the company produces DVDs, videogames, action figures and merchandise that are useful to amplify the revenues and the market share, but often these products add content to what is shown on TV, allowing storylines to progress, for example through breaking news reported on the website.

Social media has made this shift to transmedia storytelling a lot easier. Early transmedia storytelling was limited to major publishing companies like TV, film, comics, and books and the cost of entry was high. Now with the internet and social media, anyone can have access to content creation.

### 3.2 Transmedia Storytelling at Its Best

Transmedia storytelling works better in WWE and professional wrestling in general than in other serialized dramas because of the very nature of this sport-entertainment, and its main strength: wrestlers travel from arena to arena performing almost every evening, and during their tours they tell stories (which are conceived by bookers). The contemporaneity thus created between the narrated world and the real world is the secret weapon of WWE compared to other production studios in the entertainment world: during breaks between performances, wrestlers, who keep interpreting their character, can use social media to continue telling the same story, through their own profiles that they manage in real time, in the same space where viewers live, creating a suggestive mix between their real and fictitious life.

By considering wrestling as a serialized fictional product, in fact, “it is possible to analyze the kayfabe as a unique narrative frame, capable of keeping narrative coherence operating with a 1:1 ratio between real time and fictional time” (Oliva 2009).

A character that exists in a narration that takes place in real time at times produces a blurred understanding of the fictional character/real person relation.

WWE wrestlers, also called Superstars, have characters or personas that are carried over all media like their weekly television series, Twitter or any other platform. They can and have to perform their personas in their everyday life through the various social media. They are required to have Twitter handles and they can use them however they want.

By using Twitter, wrestlers are able to carry their on-screen persona off screen and into the real life. Superstars interact with each other and fans, share backstage segments, promote their merchandise. But they can also carry out on-screen feuds on the web, developing them without having to use air time on their televised show. Many times they tweet and interact with other superstars, sending out congratulations or just trash talking. This gives weight to the feuds, as if they really do not get along in their personal lives.

For example, some years ago, during a storyline between Nikki and Brie Bella, Nikki forced her sister to become her personal assistant. A few days after, Nikki posted on Vine (a short-form video hosting service where users could share six-second-long looping video clips, now closed) videos of herself coming up with embarrassing chores for her sister Brie to do. This made it seem as if the storyline continued on outside of the televised shows.

With such a large roster, it is hard to give every superstar the air time they deserve, and that the fans want. By using social media to extend the personas of the wrestlers, the WWE is able to carry out feuds and storylines outside of the television show and into everyday life. This allows every superstar to connect with the fans and audience on a whole new level.

This kind of storytelling was not previously available. Transmedia storytelling allows for the story to be told on multiple platforms, so the story feels real, and as if it was not scripted.

## 4 WWE Use of Social Media

### 4.1 Social Media and Kayfabe

Professional wrestling has received many benefits from social media, and this is especially true of independent wrestling, which has exploded in recent years, thanks in large part to the influence of these sites.

Social media have replaced portals and search engines as a starting point for navigation. Therefore, all of the content published on the web finds a great sounding board in being re-launched on social media, since it is important to go where people are nesting.

Social media allow fans to be more involved and personal with the wrestlers than ever before. It is a two-way dynamic between the superstars and the fans: from the perspective of the wrestlers, it allows them to use social media platforms to promote themselves and their promotions.

Social media have made wrestlers three-dimensional. Fans may not just choose who their favorite wrestler is, but they can also verify that real-life behavior matches the one shown on screen and understand if they like who wrestlers are as people.

There are also negative aspects, though: wrestlers are now easy target for criticism. Before social media no fan would have criticized a 2-meter-tall wrestler face-to-face; behind a computer screen, instead, fans easily turn into “keyboard lions” and can say whatever they want, even if not justifiable and dictated by hatred.

WWE Superstar Baron Corbin said: “social media give a bunch of idiots, in reality, an opinion and they don’t know how to express it appropriately. The language, the insults, all of those things, and it just makes the world seem so unhappy. If you read the Twitter feed, it seems like everyone in the entire world is beyond miserable. But, I think now, unfortunately, it’s a necessity. It’s a form of exposure and advertisement. My Instagram, my Twitter, is a form of advertisement for my business and what I do. Yeah, my brand. It is, but it is crazy how negative it is to everything!”



Still, who knows how to use social media to their fullest potential, can make a fortune, since social media have become one of the most powerful tools at anyone's disposal.

Each social media platform has its own benefits and pitfalls. Twitter, for example, allows users to engage with their audience on an unprecedented level. Wrestlers can promote shows, appearances, and new merchandise available. They can tell people where they like to eat. Some wrestlers will host Q&A sessions with a specific hashtag. The fans get to ask a question directly of the performer, and the performers get to build their brand with the hashtag.

But how do social media impact the notion of kayfabe? Social media are just an easier and faster way to expose whatever someone wants to expose.

Wrestlers try to maintain kayfabe as much as possible. On Rey Mysterio's character Twitter page, fans could possibly read posts about how much he hates Randy Orton because he beat up his buddy Jeff Hardy, but on a personal Facebook page fans could see the three of them hanging out watching sports.

Since the arrival of the Internet and social media, keeping kayfabe has been increasingly difficult, but the federations and promotions, as I said, have accepted the idea and are trying to re-negotiate the concept to find a fair compromise between what to keep secret and what to let leaked out.

In addition, some wrestlers use social media to build their own personal brands and promote other projects, whether they are kayfabe or not. For example, during his run with Impact Wrestling (a WWE's competitor federation), Matt Hardy used social media to develop the Broken Universe, and now uses his various platforms to recreate this narrative for the WWE. Meanwhile, Xavier Woods created a new platform for himself via his YouTube channel, Up Up Down Down (UDD), which gave him and the rest of the New Day, the stable he is part of, increased visibility and allowed them to get over with fans.

WWE routinely encourages interaction during its live shows through hashtags and tweet scrolls, as well as having their wrestlers engage with fans through a variety of social media sites. Even when wrestlers walk down the ramp to the ring, their name appears on television screen along with their Twitter handle. It also tries to exploit social media in new ways.

For instance, WWE Mixed Match Challenge, a tag team tournament featuring intergender pairings, has been launched in 2018 as a web television series that airs exclusively on Facebook Watch, and the company urges fans to interact with the Superstars during the bouts via Facebook's commenting feature. Interactions such as these serve two primary functions. First, as I already said, they allow the WWE to advance transmedia storylines across multiple media platforms (for example, wrestlers can taunt one another on Twitter, and commentators can mention these interactions while calling the in-ring action). In addition, "these interactions can sometimes allow fans a previously-unheard-of peek behind the kayfabe curtain and grant them a glimpse of the personalities that exist behind the characters" (Olson 2018).

Conversely, by demonstrating their true personalities, some wrestlers can break free from the strict oversight exercised by the promotion and thereby get "over" with the members of the WWE Universe. Thus, social media can shape or re-shape kayfabe within pro-wrestling and its main promotion, WWE.

## 4.2 WWE and Social Media

In 2016 alone, WWE social media had engagements over 739 million different social media accounts, grown to 850 in 2017 and 950 by the end of third quarter of 2018 (WWE Corporate, Key Performance Indicators), numbers that helped them achieve their financial and company goals during broadcasts.

At WWE headquarters in Stamford, CT, the team of marketers and strategists works hard to pump out the content that gets its viewers excited. Social media is a growing part of that process.

WWE considers social media so important, so much they generate post-show reports to analyze the audience's reactions to the events narrated on social platforms such as twitter.

The content creation team, in fact, uses Twitter as a consumer research tool, because of the instant feedback loop that it provides. Usually, at the end of pay-per-views or weekly shows, one of the superstars or one of the matches held is a top trending topic on Twitter. The team keeps an eye on what users are saying about the facts happened and the storylines told and use those insights moving forward.

While watching the show, people can use social media to connect to each other and exchange comments and impressions. They can also stay in touch with wrestlers, who use the system to build up and increase the expectation on their feuds, filling the narrative silence that exist between the airing of two episodes. Superstars use their own social media accounts, at times breaking the audience's perceived interpretation of their characters to interact with fans, both during and between broadcasts.

"You get to see what they're feeling and what they're thinking as they travel around the country and world", noted Corey Clayton (online community leader) during an interview.

WWE live broadcasts are a unique mixture of theatre, entertainment, reality television, and gameshow. They regularly "social cast" during their live and taped broadcasts, taking fans' opinions and suggestions through engagement to help shape the on-air outcomes of the product. In recent years, WWE succeeded in including fan responses in its broadcasts by featuring targeted hashtags in the corner of the screen, as well as occasionally featuring curated fan tweets in a scrolling chyron at the bottom of the screen (Oglesby 2017).

It works so well, in fact, that the company is listed weekly among the top ten social media scores by Nielsen Social Media for series and specials (<https://www.nielsensocial.com/socialcontentratings/weekly/>), outperforming other events such as Monday Night Football on social media.

It's impressive to see that WWE is one of the world's most popular brands on social media. Klout (now closed) was a service which assigned a score to a brand or person's social media influence, ranking them from one to 100. WWE's Klout last score was an impressive 99.

Moreover, through its mobile app, WWE provides viewers with a "second screen experience", and the chance to continue watching the matches during advertising breaks and get insights, exclusive information directly from the backstage.

WWE has also been a protagonist in the development of social media, although not always with excellent results.

From April 2008 to January 2011, WWE supported its own social network called WWE Universe. It was mildly successful, with 750,000 accounts created, 3.5 million photo uploads, 3 million comments and 400,000 blog posts, all generated from the network's community. The creative team has taken a U turn, though, since it realized that its main Facebook pages were seeing more action than its custom social network. The company shut down WWE Universe and, in preparation, began migrating its audience to its Facebook pages via its television properties, social icons in its website's top navigation.

In 2012 WWE tried again, by investing into the social media platform TOUT which allowed users to record 15 s videos and share them. This started a two-year partnership between the two companies. WWE would promote TOUT by having the commentators urge fans to TOUT their reactions and showcasing TOUTs that WWE superstars had made. This was a transmedia strategy that gave fans a look inside the lives of the superstars by giving the personas more depth. Because of the unpopularity of TOUT, though, the WWE has then moved on to use Vine.

On that principle of going where the people are, WWE has focused its efforts on making sure its content is available on the key social sites where its community is flocking, namely Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

WWE produces about 1,500 unique pieces of content for its website per week, which it then optimizes across its social sites. Mark Keys (VP, web production) explained "We pick and choose, from our four different shows we produce, or any public events or appearances that the superstars are doing, to any other television relationships that we have".

WWE is leveraging social media to fill in the gaps that occur between TV episodes, by creating a connection via social media.

"Our form of content is really entertainment, it's not sports. So, a lot of news, if you will, is really an extension of the storyline that you're seeing on TV", explained Keys. "One of the things that WWE can do as a program that runs 52 weeks a year that is literally scripted week by week, is that we can augment our storylines with simple feeds to these social networks on a weekly basis. So, with a two-hour show that runs on Monday, we have the ability to, two or three times a week, prompt that something else is happened and that [fans] should see it. [We can] continue the story that ended on Monday night and carry it through to the next Monday night".

Recently, WWE SmackDown Live women's champion Becky Lynch has been ruled out of her Survivor Series showdown against Raw women's champ Ronda Rousey, but their feud has continued through social media, with very hard comments by "The Man" Becky Lynch.

Becky Lynch is not new to this kind of reactions, also due to her character, and she has also been criticized for some of these. In an interview with Yahoo Sports she talked (also) about the much-discussed social media issue.

She admitted that she had actually increased the use of these media and justified herself like this:

"I know a lot of people are getting nervous about how I use my social networks, but it makes people interested and involved. I will do everything in my power to make the most of my skills. If you want to punch me in the face and keep me out, you can not keep my mouth out too.

On TV I have 15 min, if I'm lucky, to tell people what I think, but if I have a platform within reach of my fingers, I can say what I think constantly, so that everyone knows exactly who I am, if they care who I am and against whom I am fighting. I take a look at some people on social media and they all write love letters... I do not have time for this, I do not understand it".

### 4.3 Social Media Impact Wrestling by Allowing the Audience to Change Storylines

In paragraph 2.3, I explained how audience members can affect wrestling shows and kayfabe, through an example involving Daniel Bryan and the Royal Rumble 2014.

The same example is useful now to explain how it is necessary to consider the behavior of the audience not only in the arenas but also in virtual spaces.

Outside of live events, in fact, WWE's fandom largely organizes in virtual spaces, starting during the years social media campaigns like #HijackRaw, #OccupyRaw, which trended worldwide, and #CancelWWENetwork, which arose a year after Daniel Bryan's Yes Movement, in response to, again, widespread dissatisfaction over the Royal Rumble result (Stout 2015; Oglesby 2017).

After Royal Rumble 2014, the social media reactions were immediate and enormous, with "Daniel Bryan" trending worldwide on Twitter. WWE legend Mick Foley even tweeted asking of his own employer, "Does @WWE actually hate their own audience? I've never been so disgusted with a PPV". Bryan posted the following on Twitter:

"Sorry guys, the machine wanted me nowhere near the Royal Rumble match. But I thank everyone for their support. YOU are the #YESMovement. They try to keep US down and away from the top spots, but they can't ignore the reactions forever. Keep voicing your opinions. #YESMovement".

After that, a spontaneous uprising movement named #HijackRaw has formed. A fan made a Twitter account to disseminate information about the #HijackRaw plan, posting a flyer with four main objectives. The tweet alongside the posted flyer said "Our power is in our coordination. Our objective is to be one. This is how we #HijackRaw".

The plan detailed collective actions to carry out during the live broadcast of Raw, including turning their back to some wrestlers during their segments and directions as to which stipulations for Bryan the crowd should chant "Yes" or "No" for. The plan, however, wasn't immediately successful, but it took to a new evolution.

A few weeks later, in fact, during a Raw episode, Bryan built upon the notion of he and his fandom as a collective as he revealed the plans for what would eventually become known as Occupy Raw:

"Tonight is when it ends, because we are all tired of you. You are not listening to me. You are not listening to these people. You are not listening to any of us! But tonight, we're gonna make it so you have to listen to us. Because tonight, the Yes Movement is in full effect, and tonight, we are going to occupy Raw! You see, I'm not going to leave this ring until I get what I want, which is a match with Triple H at WrestleMania. And I know you've heard people say that all the time, they're not leaving this ring. But tonight, I am not alone".

After that, that, more than 100 fans in Daniel Bryan shirts make their way to ringside.

Until the day of Occupy Raw, countless fans had made predictions and posted dream scenarios on Twitter, among them Daniel Bryan defeating Batista and taking his spot in the championship match, Bryan and Triple H both being inserted into the championship match, and the eventual result – Bryan being added to the championship match if he can defeat Triple H earlier in the same night (Oglesby 2017).

So, fans can effectively use social media to change the way storylines end. On Twitter or Facebook we can express whatever we want about whomever we want, so it would be reasonable to think that there will be some negativity about the WWE.

What emerges, though, is that World Wrestling Entertainment does not fight any Twitter hashtag, trending or not, against them. That is mostly because, as I said before, the audience can't be scripted and engaging the fans is one of the main goals of the company; without the WWE Universe, WWE basically goes out of business.

## 5 Conclusions

### 5.1 Audience's Motivation

In the previous paragraphs of this paper I have shown what the main characteristics of storytelling are within the world's biggest wrestling company, WWE, and argued how social media can affect the creative process behind storyline development, allowing on one side the federation to fill the spaces between shows and to obtain a truly transmedia narrative, and on the other hand the audience to assert even more their active role in the representation, coming up to change some choices made by the management.

While the bookers are the main authors of what the outcomes will be, the fans and their social media presence can shape the programming. WWE writers will revise sometimes long-term plans for characters based upon fan reactions on social media. WWE social media has helped grow its outreach and engagement exponentially, and its impact cannot be ignored.

While the activity and impact of WWE social media are widely regarded as a success, the use of this technology is relatively new in the WWE's history. As with any phenomenon of using new communication technology, what requires attention is why users engage with WWE social media (Karlis 2018).

With these technologies, tv viewers can make their voices heard and feel like those who attend the show live in the arena, recovering and relaunching the dimension of audience's interactivity, that constitutes the main strength of pro wrestling.

Professional wrestling fans definitely use social media to “constitute their collective identity and act upon their agency to alter live performances and narratives” (Oglesby 2017).

Audience's rising awareness of their role and of the strength acquired through these tools, raises some questions, which may be investigated in future works: to what extent the WWE and other wrestling promotions are willing to ride the wave of this growing phenomenon, continuing to listen to the voice of fans in the arenas and virtual spaces? In the medium term, is it possible to arrive at a breaking point in which an increasingly

“hungry for power” audience comes into a collision course with the decisions made by creative teams and managers? or will it be possible to find a meeting point that will allow a full development of the use of social media within transmedia storytelling strategies in wrestling?

Since it is difficult to predict an early end of the social media era, an important part of the future success of professional wrestling as an entertainment product may depend on the answers to these questions.

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