**‘Viral journalism’, is it a thing? Adapting quality reporting to shifting social media algorithms and wavering audiences**

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**Abstract**

*This chapter examines the ‘viral’ practices of the leading media companies in the UK as they adapt to and adapt from the social media environment. News, political coverage, investigations, socially significant content - professional media are delivering their stories in a range of packages aimed at high engagement and sharing. These include interactive graphs, gifs, looped videos, cartoons and quote cards, among others.*

*A definition of ‘viral journalism’ is provided, with an in-depth overview of academic debates on ‘virality’. The discussion on the relation of viral storytelling to power furthers the connection of viral cultures to journalism. This emerging phenomenon is placed within the social media ecosystem and attention economy. The chapter relies on theoretical concepts from media and sociological studies as well as interdisciplinary scholarship. Case studies of recent UK viral media episodes are utilized to elucidate the tactics of viral journalism, its benefits and shortcomings.*

**Tags**: viral media, audience engagement, digital journalism, social media, algorithmic bias, clickbait

When an image of Ed Miliband awkwardly eating a bacon sarnie made front pages in 2014, journalists could little predict its subsequent digital life. Having started as a quick snap by a professional political pool photographer, it has been adapted into multiple memes by mocking internet users. The saga of the bacon sarnie ‘going viral’ might have cost Miliband and Labour the 2015 United Kingdom general election (Horton 2017). The fact that the Oxford-educated politician struggled to consume this typical workman’s breakfast quickly and gracefully elicited dozens of UK columns calling him ‘out of touch’ and ‘error-prone’. This was probably one of the first examples of ‘viral journalism’ – the phenomenon of journalism content receiving rapid and networked dissemination.

Since then, social media have largely overshadowed traditional media companies in the field of news distribution and trendsetting. Only 44% of people in the UK believe the news in traditional media; at the same time, more people are using social media for news updates (Newman et al. 2018). Audiences often do not recall the names of news sources as they receive updates from search engines and social media platforms (Kalogeropoulos, Fletcher, and Nielsen, 2018). At the same time, social networks are pulsating with numerous ‘viral hits’, short-lived sensational videos, audios, textual and visual jokes that are shared widely and rapidly.

Previous research on audience engagement with journalism in the social media ecosystem has covered instances of ‘buzzfeedification’ or ‘clickbait’ (Tandoc and Jenkins 2015), explored the role of viral hubs and influencers as gatekeepers to information (Nahon and Hemsley 2013), highlighted the tendency of algorithms to promote content that is popular over that from smaller and less connected sharers (Hill and Bradshaw 2018) and looked into the reasons why people share news on social media (Al-Rawi 2019; Kumpel, Karnowski, and Keyling, 2015). This chapter fills the gap in defining viral journalism and its role in contemporary UK media system.

The key aims of this chapter are to identify what sort of social media content and distribution techniques can be defined as ‘viral journalism’; what benefits and limitations this approach to content sharing holds for various media organisations; whether being a free website, subscription-based outlet with a paywall, or public service broadcaster affects the style of viral delivery. This research makes a distinction between viral strategies and tactics. It explores what happens when journalists lose control of the narrative due to viral communication. The chapter further evaluates whether viral journalism can be a useful tool for attracting younger audiences and forming their habit of engaging with legacy media. The work concludes by explaining where viral journalism stands compared to clickbait and provocation and how it affects the reputation of journalism organisations.

**What do we mean by ‘viral’**

The idea that something can go ‘viral’ borrows its terminology from biological studies. The concept of virality is connected to the research on internet memes. In 1976, the Oxford biologist Richard Dawkins (1976) theorized the idea of ‘memes’, and it became the first academically studied type of viral text. Dawkins (1976) defined memes as a cultural analogue to genes. As genes carry DNA between generations of humans, the units of cultural transmission that he called ‘memes’, sustain cultural development. The only difference was that genes benefit from exact replication, while memes thrive on mutation. The concept was further elaborated by other scholars (Shifman 2013; Burgess 2014; Milner 2016; Esteves and Meikle 2015; Denisova 2016, 2019), who suggested that internet memes deserve a special place in media studies. The difference between a meme and a viral text can be seen as proneness to mutation. Shifman (2014, p. 56) delineates a viral text as ‘a single cultural unit’, while memes are perceived as ‘a collection of texts’. The lines, however, are becoming increasingly blurry – a viral story can trigger a myriad of memes, making it challenging to estimate what became popular in the first place – the unique original story or its echo in replications and mutations.

Virality is ‘located in epidemiological space in which a world of things mixes with emotions, sensations, affects, and moods’ (Sampson 2012, p. 4). Social relations and power systems have their impact on virality (Nahon and Hemsley 2013; Shifman 2014; Denisova 2020). Human beings learn through witnessing dramatics plots, cultural artefacts and workplace relationships. Even the tradition of consuming caffeine can be seen as a tenet of virality. It is a pervasive cultural practice, on one hand; yet on the other hand, its biological properties stimulate action and may arouse individuals to contribute to discussions (Sampson 2012).

Technology undoubtedly plays a potent role in virality – the algorithms of networks promote the texts that receive the attention of users. From an information science perspective, virality is the ‘fast-moving information flows that reached many people and happened as a result of people sharing’ (Nahon and Hemsley 2013, p. 1). A key difference from word-of-mouth transmission is speed of distribution – a message can reach millions of people within hours, if not minutes. Critical social theory (Rosa 2013) refers to this state of society as ‘acceleration’. Modernity, industrialisation, the rapid advancement of technology, as well as the pressure of the consumer society, create a fast-paced lifestyle. Viral distribution of texts fits in ‘the logic of acceleration’ (Rosa 2013, p. xxv). One can always consume more information, goods, try various things and experiences – and the current Western social order almost pressurizes the individuals to do so. In the never-enough and extremely fast-paced environment of possibilities, deadlines, obligations and media messages, an individual is likely to gorge on social media texts at a feverish speed. Journalism is just one element of this system of almost limitless opportunities.

People and connected social networks share the work of gatekeeping – the role previously reserved solely for journalists and power holders. Users and algorithms decide what to disseminate and what to ignore. Interestingly, those at the top of the network hierarchy – opinion-leaders, celebrity bloggers, important or famous people, those with higher number of followers – have more influence on the virality of a text than average users. This gives an advantage to legacy media organisations known for their brand, yet also makes it hard for such companies to compete with entertainment celebrities and sensationalist outlets.

Nahon and Hemsley (2013) highlight another knotty tenet of virality - the hierarchy is not fixed, and the top-down flows of communication may move in various patterns, which are different from one viral event to the other. In one case it is the famous culinary blogger that triggers the virality of a text. However, on the next occasion it is the average user who publishes a funny video in their social media feed which gets picked by followers and then noticed by a social media star, thus creating a distribution chain which eventually brings the piece to stardom. Virality strongly relies on the networked ‘social infrastructure’ (Nahon and Hemsley 2013) – it is a social phenomenon that requires active decision-making and active involvement of people to occur.

**Emotional triggers for viral sharing**

Why would journalists want their stories to go viral? As the professional practice of journalists requires them to tell significant stories which inform the public, wide dissemination of a story is the ultimate goal of most reporters. Yet this is hard to achieve in the fast-paced social media ecosystem – a solid news story or investigation has to compete with personal updates and marketing information.

The application of the term ‘viral’ to media and communication has been criticized (see, for instance, Ferguson 2008) – specifically due to its links to marketing studies. Journalism and marketing have different aims – one focused on the dissemination of information and the other persuasion. Still, in order to attract readers, they both rely on what marketing studies (Berger and Milkman 2010) have identified as the power of affect.

Emotion is the key factor in making a story enticing and eventually viral. The important aspect of viral internet communication is that users need to be aroused enough to make an effort to share something. Arousal is driven by excitement, joy and desire for self-representation. It can also be generated by anger and anxiety, but is unlikely to be triggered by sadness, which is seen as a deactivating emotion (Berger and Milkman 2010). The difference between activating and deactivating emotions is a popular idea among psychological and cyber-psychological (see Alhabash et al. 2013) scholars.

Awe (as the feeling of admiration and surprised excitement), anger and anxiety have proved to be the most potent triggers for virality (Berger and Milkman 2010, p. 19-20; Guadagno et al. 2013). This is because feelings of arousal stimulate active behaviour and incentivize users to discuss and share digital content. Positivity – the desire to share something optimistic to boost mood – is another significant emotional pull that encourages users to spread content (Al-Rawi 2019; Berger and Milkman 2010). People share inspirational publications to cheer up others.

Practicality of content (e.g. advice on doing something better) is another element that increases the chances of content going viral. However, it is not as powerful a factor as emotional arousal (Guadagno et al. 2013). The creativity and artistic excellence of a text, as marketing studies prove (Nelson-Field, Riebe, and Newstead 2013), does not have a significant impact on virality. It is primarily the power of emotional engagement that motivates people to share it with others. “(I)n order for a YouTube video to ‘go viral’, it must actually incorporate emotional hooks: key signifiers that catch the attention and sensibility of a particular audience” (Balance 2012, p. 139).

Virality always has an element of ambiguity or controversy about it – there is something disturbing, pressing, exciting, or buzzing about the text that urges people to express their opinion or share it further. Blommaert and Varis (2017, p. 31) describe this phenomenon as a shift from meaning to effect, which facilitates a loose social engagement around a cultural text.

**Appearing instead of being**

Why would an individual share a message of anger, fear, or awe? There are self-representation benefits for the sharer of news, inspirational or shocking content, as well as expertise and practical tips. Through liking or sharing journalistic content, one shows that he or she is participating in the life of a society or politics. In this light, Tarde’s theory of social contagion (as cited in Marsden 2000) strongly emphasizes the value of showing achievements before they are actually achieved – it is literally the thought (or more precisely, the act of expression) that counts. The internet has largely facilitated the idea of appearing instead of being. Before virality, things were popular or trendy, but it is the availability of digital networks that enabled users to employ texts and ideas to negotiate or manifest identities, statuses and behaviors.

Within modern social science, virality is making an important new contribution to understanding how values and identities are contested. Collective identities and myths are empty notions (Giesen and Seyfert 2016). They are important for social cohesion, but never sharply defined, thus prompting the public to fill them with substance. Society is not homogenous, and neither are the ideas that people contribute to shape collective ideologies. Hence, virality represents the bloodstream of this contestation of ideas, symbols and debates.

Cultures can emerge around a viral video (Denisova and Herasimenka 2019; Burgess 2014), which enable people to create or negotiate identities as well as cultural and social codes. Despite the idea that cultures that emerge in the exchange of viral texts may be ‘imitative, playful or even ordinary’ (Burgess 2014, p. 95), the context of the moment of sharing also matters. Journalistic stories can receive varying degree of attention depending on the other trending news of the day. For instance, in 2018, the rescue of the Thai boys from the drowned cave became the globally shared viral story. According to BBC executives (private conversation 2018), it was the story that ‘captured people’s imagination’, but it did so during a quiet period in the summer when politicians are on holidays and not much happens.

In a similar vein, Marwick & boyd (2011) elaborate on Meyrowitz’s (1985) situationist approach to the media which sees people react to media texts in various ways. These are not merely based on their character or psychology but also relate to the social environment or the timing of the story. Papacharissi, Lashley, and Creech (2017) call the immediate, judgemental reactions which spread over social networks ‘opinionating’. It occurs when users rush to express their viewpoints before collecting background information or expert evaluation on the topic. They respond to the moment, to the latest ‘hot’ topic dominating the immediate social network agenda. Viral sharing is an instance of ‘opinionating’, the expression of interest, endorsement or loathing towards a story.

Collective pressure can dominate over individual preferences. In communication around viral texts, group dynamics often prevail over personal identity-performance – people often promote viral texts because of the recognition the text has already received, and follow the example of others. This is a socially affirmative practice; it is often the ritual of conviviality rather than the active communication of ideas.

**UK media: how various types of outlets adapt to viral communication**

In journalism, the leading media companies in the UK are adapting to the challenging new ecosystem. The *Economist* has invested in Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and, more innovatively, a Snapchat channel, and increased its email marketing, with a focus on newsletters as a tool for engagement. The *Guardian* has expanded their pool of video storytellers to increase video output – they produce short films, explainers, longer documentaries and atmospheric observational medium-sized pieces. *The Times*, the *Daily Mirror*, the *Sun*, and the *Daily Mail* have all notably increased the variety of their formats – from short video material to image galleries and podcasts. There are concerns though, that content can go viral for all the wrong reasons and it is hard to push nuanced, analytical, balanced reporting that becomes widely shared.

Virality can be a dive into the unknown for **legacy media**. The BBC, funded by UK residents through a licence fee, cannot invest in the commercial promotion of its Instagram channel. It cannot afford risky content that can disturb or offend its multi-generational audience. Moreover, a public service broadcaster like a BBC does not necessarily need thousands more clicks on their website and other outputs. This is because they are not reliant on advertising, and do not face the same commercial pressures as their competitors in the private sector. The BBC (private conversation 2018) exploits its social media channels to introduce itself to younger audiences who grow up in households without a TV or radio. They effectively serve as emissaries for the heritage media brand.

Virality can be a risky endeavor for **paywalled organisations**. *The Times*, for instance, offers one free article a week to its non-subscribed users, meaning that headlines are visible (seen on the website and the newspaper’s social media), but the full text is not. In 2018, an opinion piece by the journalist Claire Foges titled *Our timid leaders can learn from strongmen* (July 23, 2018) caused a scandal. In the article, Foges was discussing the authoritarian style of governance and compared it with the approach of British politicians. Lots of people shared the screenshot of the headline or mentioned the story in their tweets and Facebook posts, criticising the very idea of looking to dictators for political inspiration. When talking to *The Times*, the publication confirmed that the article attracted significant attention and much angry discussion on social networks, yet this did not translate into more clicks for the text itself (which the newspaper saw as being more balanced and less provocative than the headline would suggest).

Virality can be of mixed use for **quality media outlets, funded by an advertising or subscription model**. There is potential to attract users to meaningful stories and set the agenda. Yet, before discussing the positive potential of viral tactics, the importance of algorithms and how they can affect power dynamics needs to be discussed.

There is a peculiar trend for some members of the audience to demonstrate reduced attention span to media information, which can be called ‘viral state of mind’ (Denisova 2016). Current digital environment creates an illusion that power has shifted – each user is led to believe that they control what they consume online. However, the algorithms which shape consumption and sharing patterns are commercially driven (Noble 2018). Algorithms are also regularly changing, keeping traditional media players on their toes. Social media companies provide free training to journalism organisations on how to promote their journalism on the network. This arguably makes journalism even more reliant on digital corporations. Leading social media companies also offer organisations free software to monitor the performance of their news stories against those stories of their competitors. While they give the ‘fish’, they don’t explain the method of ‘fishing’. This realm of murky viral patterns, as coded by the tech giants, is another obstacle to the sharing of meaningful journalism on the networks.

Another reason why viral journalism may not ameliorate the loss of trust in journalism and public information is partisan and identity politics. Social media discussions thrive on emotions – and this is why the example of a *Financial Times*’s piece from June 2020 stands out as a model case. *The awkward lessons of my luxury lockdown in Kensington* (Advani 2020) by the freelancer Shruti Advani documented the luxurious lifestyle that the author was treating herself and her household to during the first Covid-19 lockdown. Social media users flocked to ridicule details in the article, such as flower delivery bills, Harrods food hall spending and the fact that the author was self-isolating with a nanny. ‘The backlash, both on social media and in the comments below the article, was swift and brutal’ (Dunkley and Urwin 2020, para 5). This type of article was not representative of the balanced and painstakingly researched reporting for which *Financial Times* is famous, yet it was this piece, not the newspaper’s extensive coverage of Covid-19, which generated the most discussion on Twitter.

Nonetheless, **positive ‘viral’ tactics do exist** – largely championed by the likes of *Financial Times*, *Bloomberg* and *The Economist*. These media organisations repackage their articles in accessible still graphs, interactive graphs, short video explainers, quotes and image galleries – but rarely memes. In my monograph on internet memes (Denisova 2019), I called them the ‘fast-food media’: attractive, big on exciting smells and sights, these media texts are remarkably low on actual information and analysis. Viral journalism is not ‘fast-food media’. It is the inventive repackaging of meaningful content in an array of shapes and sizes that can reach wandering audiences. A positive example of a journalistic story gone viral is the investigation by *Financial Times* into incidents of sexual harassment at the private Presidents Club Charity Dinner (Marriage 2018). The story was presented on the FT’s social media channels as captioned images, quote cards, short videos (including one of the journalist going undercover), and key points from the article itself. From this example, it is evident that viral journalism means diversification – a variety of formats employed to push the story and engage readers through multiple channels.

So, is viral journalism a ‘thing’? Do we need another word to define the multi-platformed storytelling that aims at speedy and wide audience engagement? The answer is, largely, yes. From one critical perspective, largely influenced by the events of the Covid-19 pandemic, ‘viral’ may not be the first word to be associated with the spread of affective or attention-grabbing information (see also Denisova 2020). Denotation of the word is probably much stronger than its connotations for the time being. Yet, in the long run, the concept does capture a sweet spot, a crossroads, where the thinking of the journalism team intersects with the excitement of the audience – those articles or outputs that become ‘viral’ are meaningful for the media’s engagement with its readers. Moreover, as *The* *Economist*’s Kevin Young (2020) testifies, experimenting with the likes of Instagram, a social media channel with younger user base, enables legacy media to connect with the 18-34 demographic. These ‘habit-forming, traffic-driving’ experiments bring recognition and brand awareness as well as generating conversations around stories produced by established journalism teams.

Viral journalism is a delicate balancing act. When done meaningfully, it can bring traffic and public interest. Yet, when geared towards provocation and clickbait, viral storytelling can harm the reputation – whilst not even bringing traffic to media organisations. The best examples of viral journalism rely on high quality original content and diversified forms and channels of presentation. By following these principles, quality journalism organisations can compete with marketing and entertaining content on social media, and, while still reliant on algorithmic bias, can nonetheless create more opportunities to get through to the reader.

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