EDITORIAL

How to Define 'Viral' for Media Studies?

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In this editorial for WPCC's 'Viral Media' issue the author asks whether the metaphor of viral media has held up well since it was coined. Considering the debate she suggests a clear distinction – notwithstanding the major role of technology – of viral media, when compared to biological viruses, which is the role of emotions in driving virality. This is what 'distinguishes the biological "virus" from its psychologically driven communication counterpart'.

'Viral' is indeed an 'imperfect term for rapid spread of information' but viral media items still have the potential to deliver 'progressive ideas'. This editorial notes how the contents of the issue plays host to a variety of fresh perspectives in its themes such as corrupted play, journalistic choice, viral politics, voice and nostalgia. It also notes, referring to the issue's interview with Kishonna Gray, the dangers of platforms simply standing aside to allow toxic viral messaging and racism. It may be impossible to counter 'morally ambivalent' memes with regulatory or any other kind of 'vaccines' though it might, the author concludes, 'be reasonable to limit the expanse of the viral flows and to question the algorithmic patterns of digital platforms' even as memes' popularity and resistance to total marketing control preserve their continuing (if somewhat tarnished) reputation as a 'digital darling'.

Keywords: platforms; viral; algorithms; communications; emotions; virality

Some metaphors don't age well. 'Viral' and 'virality' might be among them. What initially was coined – in sociology and media studies – as an allegory of rapid distribution of information and ideas, does strike the researcher today as a limited definition. Viruses affect the living cells of the body, they replicate and mutate, affecting the immunity of the carrier. 'Virus' comes from the Latin word signifying 'poison'. But are media viruses similar to biological ones: are they always toxic; is there a remedy for them and can viruses be a force for good?

'Virality' has been used to discuss a text that spreads widely in a matter of seconds, minutes or hours in the realm of social networks and other connected platforms. The media publication *Wired* refers to 'going viral' as the process when a media unit (for example, a video) gets mass exposure via a sharing infrastructure (Veix, 2018). Nahon and Hemsley (2013), in the most accurate and all-encompassing study of virality to the present day, stress the crucial role of technology – digital networks have enabled the interconnection of endless numbers of digitally active individuals.

This 'social infrastructure' enables multi-dimensional viral diffusion that relies on networked hubs (celebrities, influencers, media professionals). Yet, viral communication can also challenge the hierarchy – it is not uncommon that a less connected or less famous user gains popularity with one successful viral message. The analogy of an infectious 'virus' stands the test of being applicable to a social exchange; however, it does not do justice to the democratic (and sometimes positive) powers of virality, its ability to accelerate the distribution of urgent messages or unwelcome truths that need to be addressed. Viral can help establish new trends within public discourse.[1]

Yet, probing further the limitations of the biology-driven term, 'viral' has been criticised (e.g. Ferguson, 2008) for leaning on marketing training. Public relations and advertising professionals pursue the goal of reaching large audiences with a 'sticky' (Jenkins et al., 2013) visual symbol or slogan. When any message 'goes viral' online, it entails a catchy and emotion-triggering element. This is similar to the concept of an advert. Nonetheless, the role of emotions in driving virality distinguishes the biological 'virus' from its psychologically driven communication counterpart. Berger and Milkman (2010) have rigorously stressed the role of affect in sharing: it is the three feelings – awe, anxiety and anger, that make it irresistible for the user to press the 'share' button under the story. Biological infections are not emotional, but humans are.

There is the third component of viral communication that confuses the application of the medical term. Viruses can be combatted by vaccines – but media theory has not so far come up with a definition of digital vaccine against a digital virus. Media literacy might be a welcome supplement to boost one's critical stance towards virality, but it does not prevent the spread of emotionally triggering, socially resonating and catchy stories.

This special edition of *WPCC* on Viral Media aims to address some of the gaps in virality studies. It looks at the interlinks between marketing, social theory, media studies and psychology in order to evaluate and clarify the concept of virality for the 2020s. Viral messages are playing an increasingly important role in journalism, political information and campaigning, as well as social cohesion – so now is the right time to put them under the microscope.

Sam Duncan applies the concepts of 'play' and especially 'corrupted play' in his examination of viral media's role in the scandal involving Cricket Australia in 2018. He unveils the dark consequences of sensationalism that bring chiefly division and controversy. While social media are partially to blame for 'corrupted play', mainstream media outlets do also manipulate information and exacerbate tension.

Paul Stringer's work on the viral efforts of professional journalism relates to Duncan's paper, but provides a different angle. Stringer spent a considerable amount of time interviewing journalists and editors of *Vice* and *BuzzFeed*, two leading digital first media companies. He discovered that what used to be the fringe of journalistic practice – clicks, shares and viral renown – has become the cornerstone of agenda-setting and some significant editorial choices. While adhering to high standards of professional journalism, these edgy media organisations do nonetheless follow the audience in their digital choices and sometimes outsource decision-making to the readers ever more than their traditional predecessors.

In a more political turn, Helton Levy and Claudia Sarmento look for 'virality of communism' in the tweets surrounding the 2018 presidential elections in Brazil. They examine memes and YouTube videos that stimulate an anti-communist discourse – Che Guevara with red lips – while also highlighting the instances of word manipulation, when 'communist' is used almost as a synonym for inefficiency or a fraud. This article agrees with other scholars on the role of emotions in viral politics – hopelessness and anxiety underpin much of the discourse.

Radio may not be the first medium that comes to mind when we talk about virality, yet Daithí McMahon provides a commendable study of how the old and the new media can

complement each other. This work explores the successful Facebook strategy of the Irish radio station Beat that utilised viral messages that appealed to memory and affect – and contributed to the cohesion of a digital community.

Visibility and voice are expected to be the positive forces that enable an open and democratic society. However, the interview with Dr Kishonna Gray, expert in intersectionality and cyberfeminism, reveals the alarming uses of viral communication by privileged netizens that attack marginalised ones. Dr Gray questions the moral stance of digital platforms that offer algorithmic endorsement to this hateful and damaging content.

In the last offering of this edition, WPCC's interview about memes and my own book *Internet Memes and Society* adds some further understanding of the distinction between memes and viral messages and the rising importance of memes for politics and their moral ambivalence. It also touches upon the chameleon nature of memes that enabled them to last for many decades and still keep the reputation of a 'digital darling' – the misuse of memes can backfire against those who try to exploit them commercially, which may explain their still-'indie' reputation.

'Viral' is an imperfect term for rapid spread of information. 'Viral' media communication has the potential to offer progressive ideas, not only toxic ones. Sharing is highly emotional and, unlike biological viruses, does not rely on the frailty of the immune system – but on psychological triggers. And finally, what is the vaccine for media viruses? In the times when even professional journalists dip into viral for the benefit of providing public information and engaging storytelling, there is no clear remedy for tackling virality. Do we have to? As intersectional and political studies suggest, it might be reasonable to limit the expanse of the viral flows and to question the algorithmic patterns of digital platforms.

We hope you enjoy reading this special edition as much as all of us at *WPCC* editorial team enjoyed working on it. Do share online these articles and ideas – if any theme goes viral, we may want to assemble the next edition to investigate it further.

Note

[1] Nor everything that spreads is viral. Hashtag campaigns and the flows of 'likes' that celebrities and influencers enjoy online on their post, do not constitute virality. A wood fire-like dissemination of a particular media message – video, text, tweet, sound, object – classifies as viral when it gains a significant amount of attention in an insignificant amount of time.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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