„BABEȘ-BOLYAI" UNIVERSITY CLUJ-NAPOCA

THE FACULTY OF POLITICAL, ADMINISTRATIVE AND COMMUNICATION SCIENCES

SUMMARY OF THE PHD THESIS

PRESS IN THE DIGITAL ERA:

CREATING VIRAL CONTENT

PhD coordinator:

Professor Elena Abrudan, PhD

PhD candidate:

Decebal Remus Florescu

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STRUCTURE OF THE PHD THESIS

Chapter 3. Why we share

3.1 Social communication, from Aristotel to the latest studies in neurosciences

  3.1.1 The social brain

  3.1.2 We are built so that we want to pass on information to other people

  3.1.3 Information sharing and the pleasure circuits of the brain

3.2 The sociological perspective

  3.2.1 The social capital

  3.2.2 The symbolic and cultural capital

  3.2.3 The digital clothing of identity

3.3 The physiological perspective

3.4 The psychological perspective

  3.4.1 Fake news are 70% more likely to be reshared than real news

  3.4.2 Virality and the Bayesian surprise

  3.4.3 The search for the new, one of the four dimensions of temperament

  3.4.4 Dopamine, the ingredient for the success of social networks

  3.4.5 Operational conditioning

  3.4.6 Gambling, video games and social networks

  3.4.7 The dependence on social contact

Chapter 4 – Case studies

4.1 How does the degree of emotionality of articles affect the virality for the Romanian press

  4.1.1 Methodology

    4.1.1.1 The chosen publication

    4.1.1.2 How to read the press in the digital era

    4.1.1.3 How were emotionality, virality and audience computed

    4.1.1.4 Results

      4.1.1.4.1 The emotionality - virality - audience relationship

      4.1.1.4.2 The virality – audience relationship

      4.1.1.4.3 The emotionality – audience relationship

      4.1.1.4.4 The emotionality – virality relationship

      4.1.1.4.5 The valence-audience relationship

4.2 How do the news factors influence virality and audience for the online edition of the *Adevărul* **broadsheet?**

4.3 Conclusions

4.4 The limits of this study and future research directions

References

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The digital era, although it is not the first technological revolution throughout the human history, it definitely is the first one that allows almost anyone to create and disseminate online content, without any need for intermediaries, according to the statements of Google's visionary directors Jared Cohen and Eric Schmidt (2013) in the "The New Digital Age. Remodelling the future of people, nations and businesses" book. Hundreds of millions of Internet users around the world create huge amounts of content every minute, which is further channelled by the big technology companies on giant online platforms in order to capture the users' attention for as long as possible. Moreover, entertainment providers (movies, serials, video games, music) such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Spotify, HBO, Sony Interactive Entertainment, Nintendo and EA compete for the very same captured attention, which invest billions of dollars in order to deliver premium services. Nonetheless, pubic figures and the new online stars - the so-called influencers –have to be taken into account because they reach dizzying audience figures. Soccer player Cristiano Ronaldo, for example, is followed on Instagram by more than 150 million people, while Kylie Jenner, a young woman from the US who became famous overnight for attending a reality TV show, is followed by 130 millions of people in this network.

In this fierce competition for drawing the limited attention of Internet users, journalists also compete, being the only ones from the above presented list whose job description actually indicates that they "exercise their profession in order to serve the public interest". The digital era has put traditional media institutions in a situation where the production of quality journalism is no longer sufficient in order to ensure their survival. The "Innovation" report - considered by specialists as "one of the key documents of this media era" - which sets out the strategy of adapting The New York Times to the new global press market, concludes that the publication should "break the audience code in the digital era" in order to deliver the work of journalists to readers in an over-saturated ecosystem of content creators (Benton, 2014).

Do you adapt or do you disappear? - this is the question asked by journalists all over the world as technology increasingly changes the consumption habits of press readers. In this context the ideal adaptation consists of combining the professional skills that journalists have with this new wave of technologies, in order to create a new type of sustainable journalism for the digital age. Furthermore, the proliferation of social networks allows news articles to reach a very large number of people in a very short time, without a marketing budget, through a contagion process similar to the spreading mechanism of a virus. The phenomenon has been called "viralisation/going viral" and it has become one of the elements without which an audience growth strategy in the digital era cannot be conceived. The difficulty of getting the

content going viral into the "ocean" of information in which modern humans live has led some researchers consider that they are dealing with an art and not a science. The research of elements that determine the virality of content has become an important concern for the academic world as well as for the practitioners in the digital era.

The "formula" for obtaining viral content in the online print media is the main topic of this PhD thesis and is it addressed in the context of the PhD candidate's experience of over 15 years of field activity.

In Chapter I - we set the context in which the research is carried out, focusing on how the digital era influences the press; we have established why the chosen topic is important and where it is positioned in the context of the specialized literature, and the novelty element that it adds respectively. We also set out the research hypotheses and the research methodology.

In Chapter II - the essential elements of the paper are theoretically outlined: the concepts that emerged in relation to the viral content; the precursors of viral content from the 19th century; the general model of virality applicable to products, services and messages; the media virality formula applied in the press with its two approaches: one based on emotionality, and the other on based the idea of news factors.

In Chapter III - we break down the mechanism of content viralisation to its "primordial element" - the decision of an internet user to share an article, which is dissected from a multidisciplinary perspective: anthropological, psychological, neurological and sociological.

In Chapter IV - we conduct several case studies that involve the analysis of the Romanian press, in order to discover to what extent are the previously obtained results of researchers from well-known Western universities valid and applicable to our country. In the end, I briefly point out what are the elements derived from the specialized literature and from the carried out case studies that can really be used by Romanian journalists.

In the theoretical chapters we presented the main scientific discoveries in the field, from the multiple hypotheses regarding the most complete definition of the concept, to the elements that determine the viralisation of the content and to the analysis of the anthropological, sociological, psychological and neurological mechanisms that make us distribute certain types of articles. .

Sharad Goel from Stanford University and his New York Microsoft Research Center colleagues analysed a billion Twitter posts in order to clearly and comprehensively define the

concept of "virality" (Goel, 2016). The researchers concluded that we cannot put the equal sign between popularity (number of hits/views) and virality of content (number of shares). Thus, we cannot say that the World Cup final is viral, even if it attracts a large number of views, because all these users have only one major source: the television station that broadcasts the game. Goel and his collaborators defined the concept of structural virality, which implies the existence of two elements: "size", i.e. a large number of people who accessed the material and "depth" - the content reached a large number of people vertically, due to a successive transmission mechanism from user to user, across multiple generations / branches (Goel, 2016).

Many researchers have defined virality as an electronic variant of mouth-to-mouth / human-to-human transmission of information (De Bruyn and Lilien, 2008; Eckler and Rodgers, 2014; Golan and Zaidner, 2008; Kaikati and Kaikati, 2004; Pastor, 2000; Phelps et al., 2004; Thomas, 2004; Welker, 2002; Wilson, 2000). This kind of transmitting information has been studied intensively, in areas such as marketing, business administration, commerce. With the development of social networks, the distribution of information "from man to man" has migrated online and it has become a research theme for researchers in the journalism field. This is why one of the most prolific authors of viral content is Jonah Berger, a professor at Wharton Business School at the University of Pennsylvania, one of the top American universities in the Ivy League. Berger has spent the last 15 years concentrating his academic research on topics such as social influence, contagion and social transmission, viral content (Berger and Heath, 2005; Berger and Fitzsimons, 2008; Berger, Sorensen and Rasmussen, 2010; Berger, 2011, 2013; Berger and Milkman, 2010, 2012). Summarizing the most important discoveries he made by studying how a product, service or message can go viral, the American researcher extracted six essential elements: social currency, triggering factors, emotion, practical value, audience and stories.

Jonah Berger and his colleague at the University of Pennsylvania, Katherine L. Milkman have furthered developed their studies on viral content by focusing, this time, on the viral dissemination of news articles. Published in the journal "Journal of Marketing Research" in 2012, the "What Makes Online Content Go Viral" article has become one of the most cited in the literature and it has obtained an award from the American Marketing Association in 2017 that "honours the article that made the most significant long-term contribution to marketing theory, methodology and / or practice" (Markelz, 2017). The researchers analyse about 7,000 articles published in The New York Times and they determine those particular characteristic elements of the most viral materials. Summing up, they prove that a news article will become

viral if it conveys emotions to the readers, the most effective in terms of viralisation being those of psychological activation such as anger, anxiety or veneration / amazement (Berger, 2012).

Researcher Jacopo Staiano of the Sorbonne University argues that it is not individual emotions that determine virality, but their location within the "Valence-Activation-Domination" model, a structure used by psychologists to characterize emotions (Staiano, 2015). Thus, each emotion is a combination of three characteristics: valence, activation, domination. The conclusion of this researcher is that sharing on social networks is determined by emotions with a high degree of domination, i.e. those over which the reader has more control, such as admiration or joy. Strong activating emotions rather force readers to post comments on the articles in question, and negative emotions are more viral than positive ones (Staiano, 2015).

The importance of emotions in journalistic content was emphasized by one of the first journalism theorists, American professor Walter Lippmann (1921) who argued that newspaper articles should provoke the reader to "feel an emotion", to make him "feel a a kind of personal identification with the stories he reads", "to involve him in news as he is involved in a play, through personal identification"- but also by nowadays press theorists. The head of the Communication Department at the University of Illinois, Chicago, Zizi Papacharissi (2012), speaks about the use of emotions within news articles in a Nieman Lab reference: "I do not mean sentimental news, but better written news, through the use of sentiment, which leads, directs, informs and pluralizes the processes and values of the news".

One of the most important approaches of researchers in terms of obtaining viral content refers to the so-called "news factors" i.e. those elements that give an event a journalistic value. Damian Trilling and colleagues at the University of Amsterdam have published a study in the "Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly" journal, which introduces the concept of "distribution value", with the aim of trying to explain how the virality of an article can be predicted (Trilling, 2017). Dutch researchers claim that the most relevant articles in journalism, the ones that contain the most news items, are the ones most likely to go viral. Defining news factors is an approach that dates back to the beginning of the 20th century and continues to this day. The most cited list of news factors is that of the Norwegians Galtung and Ruge (1965), which was adapted to the 21st century by the British Harcup and O'Neill (2001). They summarize the following 10 news factors: power elite, celebrity, entertainment, surprise, negative news, positive news, magnitude, relevance, continuation of already addressed news (follow-ups), newspaper agenda.

The German researcher Christiane Eilders (2006) analyse the most important theorists who proposed lists of news factors, from Galtung and Ruge (1965) to Harcup and O'Neill (2001), and concludes: the elements that make a journalist choose certain events to turn them into news are, to a large extent, the very same ones with the relevant elements for every human being according to the general principles of human perception. Thus, there are three explanations for which an event is relevant to a person: evolutionary theory (which has taught us to be aware of the stimuli that could be threatening), the general psychological mechanisms according to which familiar objects, persons or events will arouse interest, because there already is a mental matrix regarding the relationship with them and, none the least, the social relevance (according to which we will pay attention not only to events that directly affect us, but also to those that can have consequences for our role within society or it can refer to the collective social norms and society as a whole).

Eilders (2006) shows that "surprise" and "relevance" are essential elements that influence the selection of news by both journalists and readers. Factors such as the presence of conflict, human interest and positive news are the most viral in the Dutch press (Trilling, 2017). In a 2014 study by Columbia University researchers analysed 800 news headlines published in eight major US newspapers, and they find that there is a strong relationship between the social deviance (the surprise factor) of the covered event or topic and the number of redistributions of articles on Twitter (Diakopoulos, 2014).

Online news readers prefer to read and share the positive news that produces a feeling of "veneration / amazement" and not the negative news that causes feelings of anger or anxiety. Also, items such as relevance and surprise / unexpected / unusual are most likely to viralise news on Twitter and YouTube networks, according to a study written by researchers at Concordia University in Montreal (Al-Rawi, 2017).

Researcher Soroush Vosoughi and colleagues at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) have published one of the largest articles on virality in 2018 in the Science journal. They study the spread of all verified, true and false news, distributed on Twitter from 2006 to 2017. The results are surprising: "fake news had 70% more chances to be redistributed on Twitter than true news" (Vosoughi, 2018). The explanation given by researchers, based on studies in neuroscience, anthropology and psychology, consists in the presence of the "novelty / surprise" element in the fake news to a greater extent than in the real news. "The sensory cortex may have evolved to adapt, anticipate and attenuate the expected normal statistical events of the surrounding world (Olshausen and Field, 1996; Müller, Metha, Krauskopf and Lennie,

1999; Dragoi, Sharma, Miller and Sur, 2002; David, Vinje and Gallant, 2004), focusing on events that are unpredictable or surprising instead (Fairhall, Lewen et al., 2001), shows researcher Laurent Itti (2009).

Being questioned "Why do we share", the consulted researchers show that the transmission of information to others is part of human nature (Dunbar, 1998; Adolphs, 2003) and it has even ensured the survival and development of the species through different historical periods (Boyd 2011, Hermida 2014), being so important that it was deeply engraved in the human brain, so that when we do hear new information, the neural networks that are in charge of sharing them with others are activated (Lieberman, 2013); opposed to these, the social interaction associated with information sharing activates pleasure centres in the brain, (Kelley and Berridge 2002; Tamir 2012; Rademacher et al. 2010; Izuma et al., 2008; Spreckelmeyer et al., 2009) which is why the technology that makes this interaction possible causes dependence in a very short time (Veissière, 2018; Krach et al. 2010); also, the distribution of new, surprising and useful information has the role of increasing the social, symbolic and cultural capital of people (Berger, 2013; Bourdieu, 1992; Putnam, 2000).

The practical part of the paper consists of applying the Western literature published findings regarding the becoming of viral content (the most relevant studies worked with samples from the US and UK press) for the case of the Romanian press in order to establish to what extent these may be used by local journalists.

In the first case study, we analysed 8,000 articles published on the online platform of the daily Adevărul (in October 2017, November 2017, December 2017, January 2018 and July 2018) to determine the relationship between emotionality and virality. The most relevant studies in the field have shown - using content from the American and British press - that the degree of emotionality is the essential element that, regardless of the subject of the article, can increase its chances of becoming viral. The degree of emotionality of an article is equal to the percentage of affective words - words that produce positive or negative emotions to the reader - of the total words of an article. Activation emotions, such as veneration, anxiety and anger are the ones that have the greatest positive impact on virality.

Given the large amount of data that had to be analysed, it was necessary to develop a special computer program for word counting in order to determine the emotionality of the articles. Another challenge in performing the analysis was that there did not exist a list of

affective words in the Romanian language, so it was necessary to adapt such a dictionary from English.

In contrast to the analysed works which study the relationship between emotionality and virality, this research goes one step further as we also consider the audience (number of views).

We determine the emotionality and virality for the Top 10 most read articles, Top 40 most read articles and the average values of these variables determined from the analysis of all the articles published on the home page during the analysed period respectively. Thus we are able to analyse the specific relationship between emotionality, virality and audience.

The conclusion from these case studies is that the degree of emotionality of the articles increases as we move towards the top of the mostly accessed materials. Emotionality is 4.3% if we refer to the mean of analysed articles on the adevarul.ro during the monitored months. It further increases to 6.8% in the case of the Top 40 mostly visited articles, reaching the maximum value in the Top 10 articles (9.3%). The same evolution is recorded in terms of virality, counted as the number of Facebook shares: the average number of shares held by an article on adevarul.ro during the monitored period is 408; an article from the Top 40 has about 2,836 shares while an article from Top 10 has about 3,821 shares.

Thus, the relationship between emotionality, virality and audience is of the following type: when the degree of emotionality increases, the virality and the audience increase as well. Nonetheless, the use of affective words is a way to get viral content both in English and Romanian media.

The second conducted case study focuses on the hypothesis that more journalistic articles get more attention from readers who share articles and are therefore more likely to go viral. We analyse the Top 10 articles regarding the number of views from the monitored period using the list of news factors of Harcup and O'Neill (2001): power elite, celebrity, entertainment, surprise, negative news, positive news, magnitude, relevance, follow-ups and the newspaper's agenda. For each article (50 articles in total) we manually code the presence / absence of the 10 previously mentioned news factors. In the end, we validate which are the predominant news factors for the mostly accessed articles on adevarul.ro, which have, in fact, the highest degree of emotionality and virality.

According to the obtained results, "surprise" is the most present news factor in the top read articles on adevarul.ro (86%), which are also the ones with the highest degree of

emotionality and virality. The factors "relevance" (58%) and "entertainment" (48%) have a major importance as well.

Consumers of online content who manage to break free for a while from the entertainment stream that floods them through a variety of channels, have a choice between a very attractive type of journalistic content, but which is poor in terms of the relevance of information for their lives on the one hand and a less attractive type of journalism, but which contains relevant information, on the other hand. In this context, the mission of journalists is to make the relevant news interesting, thus ensuring their viralisation and, finally, the audience needed for survival in the digital era.

The results obtained from the analysis of the specialized literature and from the analysed case studies for monitoring the Romanian press allow us to conclude that in order to create viral content, the journalists must consider the use of affective words that determine the increase of the degree of emotionality of the articles on the one hand, and the news factors that determine viralisation (surprise, relevance, entertainment) on the other hand.

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