

Contagion: Viral Articles in Student Media

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Abstract

How does the viral media phenomenon add complexities to the obligations of student journalism and what demands does it place on student reporters and on college media advisers? To get at that question we must first establish a working definition of "viral article" as applied to online content, and then try to understand what kinds of articles go viral and why. Case studies will point up the benefits and the problematic outcomes of viral student reporting, allowing for a detailed analysis of the strategies college media advisers can use to assist students in anticipating and handling viral content.

Introduction

The modern day viral media phenomenon is both misunderstood and under theorized. As a culture we have grown so accustomed to the proliferation of viral events that we treat them as if they are inevitable, yet so unpredictable and short lived as to be unimportant. However, it is in the interest of media professionals to tangle with the cultural significance of the viral phenomenon if only because, sooner or later, we are likely to encounter it in our own newsrooms. If we have not personally created viral content, we probably know someone who has, for as random as viral stories may seem, they are not rare. Trivializing viral events sets us up to be repeatedly blindsided by their impact. Furthermore, as student journalists create a significant portion of the news content that goes viral, anyone associated with student media has all the more reason to understand the peculiar obligations viral incidents present. This paper engages questions about what goes viral and why, what sorts of outcomes can be expected from a viral event and how best to prepare for them. I will argue that student journalists are in a position to anticipate what stories might go viral, and that their media advisers can help them manage viral events successfully, so as to avoid harmful repercussions and contribute meaningful reporting to a broad audience.

Because of the lack of direct research in this area, this paper necessarily draws on work from tangential fields such as memetics, epidemiology, sociology and cultural anthropology to substantiate its claims. In many cases, terms borrowed from those disciplines, such as "meme" and "innovation," are treated as close cousins of "viral content" and are considered roughly interchangeable for our purposes. Interviews with student reporters and media advisers who have direct experience creating and managing viral content are offered to ground the discussion in the practical realm. It should also be noted that, for the purposes of this discussion, what will be treated as "viral" in the Internet sense is not based on a mathematical equation of x reads or hits over x hours, as these numbers are fundamentally arbitrary. The real question is relative saturation within the target population, be it local or global. Student reporting, which is hyper-local by nature, may go viral within its community or at the national level. The analysis presented here is relevant in either case.

Methodology

The methodology used in this paper is essentially qualitative with some statistics provided as points of departure for future research. Thirty-four sample viral articles were analyzed to produce the conclusions presented in this paper. The articles were gathered first by interviewing students at the March 2012 College Media Association (CMA) conference in New York City, then by posting a request to the CMA listserv and finally by reading PBS.org's MediaShift blog. In the course of interviewing five advisers and nine students who had overseen or created viral content for their college papers, additional viral articles were mentioned and slowly a list began to form. Participants self-selected based on interest, but represented both two and four year colleges of varying sizes. In the interest of full disclosure it must be noted that four of the 34 samples were written by staffers at the student newspaper I advise, The College VOICE, over the course of the last three years. However, to prevent any possible bias, these four were removed whenever statistics were calculated; they were simply a starting point that prompted my interest in the subject and anecdotal touchstones that spurred my analysis. To be considered "viral student media" for the purposes of this paper, each sample had to have been created by a registered student for distribution through a college news outlet associated with their two or four-year not-for-profit college or university (independent papers and blogs were included so long as they were directly affiliated with a college or university system). Twenty-seven of the pieces were articles, and many of those articles included photographs. Two pieces were editorial cartoons, three were stand-alone photos, one was a tweet (the Joe Paterno death tweet from Onward State) and one—which is discussed in detail—was a series of linked articles and multimedia content that went viral and stayed so for more than two weeks. The submissions came from colleges of varying sizes and publication frequencies, making it difficult to create any standard measurement for virality; however, each piece had to meet one of the following criteria:

- The piece was picked up or referenced by three or more regional mainstream media outlets
- The piece was picked up by one or more national media outlets
- For colleges with fewer than 10,000 full-time students: the piece generated at least one hundred comments online within the first week of publication (comments were considered valid if they appeared on Facebook, Twitter or in the comments panel of the article itself)
 - For colleges with more than 10,000 full-time students the piece generated at least 400 comments within the first week of publication
 - The article was shared or liked more than 500 times on Facebook or retweeted more than 500 times

In many cases advisers volunteered the number of reads or page views an article received, but they were not asked to furnish private analytics data. Instead, these claims were verified by observing the number of links, comments, retweets, likes and shares. Some viral content was excluded, such as resumes and video and blog content that was not linked to a student news outlet.

Towards a Definition of "Viral"

Wherever it appears, the term "viral" seems to have negative connotations. In the field of epidemiology—to sum up Stedman's Medical Dictionary entry—viral describes a phenomenon in which a minute organism colonizes a living host and spreads rapidly to a broader population. Philosophers use the term to denote a kind of moral or intellectual corruption and the term derives from the Latin word for poison. The associations are to sickness, moral turpitude

and death.

Some media theorists have tried to re-inflect the term “viral,” but with limited success. The third Futures of Entertainment (FoE) conference, held at MIT in November of 2008, sponsored by the Creative Culture Consortium, was led by Henry Jenkins, a media scholar at MIT who wrote the book *Convergence Culture* (2006). In Jenkins’s opening keynote he “critiqu[ed] the blanket usage of the term ‘viral media’ in journalism, industry, and the academy...Instead, Jenkins argued, we should think of these media forms...as ‘spreadable media,’ emphasizing the actions of the media creators and sharers, rather than their passivity as suggested by the metaphor of the virus” (Kompore 2008).

Jenkins is right in that the agency of content creators should not be ignored, but the defining element of a viral event is its inability to be contained or controlled. Moreover, his emphasis on the creation of the content runs counter to fact that almost no one seems to know that they are creating viral content when they are doing so, and fewer still ever set out to do so. To be an unwitting creator is little agency indeed. To use the term “spreadable” is to extract the negative connotation of “viral” when, in fact, we do have a negative view of the viral event precisely because hosting something over which we have no control is highly unsettling.

What Goes Viral and Why?

However, while we apply the anxiety-laden term “viral” to fast moving Internet content, at the same time we dismiss it like a seasonal cold. Douglas Rushkoff, in his book *Media Virus: Hidden Agendas in Popular Culture* (1996), takes aim at mainstream news sources and cautions against a dismissive attitude toward their alternative. He writes:

Our formerly investigative mainstream “news” programs like “60 Minutes” or “Dateline” appear restrained and toothless in comparison to our more delightfully irresponsible outlets. How better to see what the heartland of America looks like than barging in unannounced with the camera crew from “Cops”—and how better to evaluate the role of drugs and alcohol in contributing to domestic violence, robbery and homicide? (3)

Although Rushkoff was writing before the advent of the modern day viral Internet phenomenon, his perspective still holds. He asks us to think differently about the usefulness of what are essentially viral elements of popular culture. He encourages us to see merit in some of the more quotidian elements of our society and to grapple with their meaning in our lives. Rushkoff goes on to say:

Media events...titillate us for a reason...The imagery has emerged from the psychic shadows -- it is not controlling us any more than our dreams do, but neither can we attempt to control it without suffering the consequences...If we embrace the seeming darkness of the dream, and attempt to reckon with its messengers, we stand a chance of learning a lot more about ourselves in the process (3).

One of the key contentions of this paper is that viral content doesn’t just well up out of nowhere; instead, as Rushkoff suggests, it emerges “from the psychic shadows.” It is the result of complex creative forces ricocheting off the cultural subconscious.

In his seminal work, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949), Joseph Campbell writes, “Throughout the inhabited world, in all times and under every circumstance, myths of man have flourished...It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into the human cultural manifestation” (1). Borrowing from mythic analysis might seem counterintuitive in that myths, by their nature, are enduring and viral stories are fleeting. But viral stories are essentially myths dressed in modern clothing. They tap into the same human dramas that inspired the ancient Greeks,

they rely on the same archetypal figures and plots of heroism, tragedy and comedy that have sustained literature and history. Their brevity has mainly to do with our newfound ability to create, circulate and consume stories about ourselves very, very quickly, but make no mistake: they are the same stories.

The success of each iteration of an archetypal story is, however, entirely determined by its ability to tap into the particular anxieties and fixations of the day. Take, for example, the narrative of the abducted child, one that appears again and again across cultures and throughout history. In 2007 the story of little Madeleine McCann went viral. McCann, a four-year-old British girl, was on holiday in Spain, with her parents and twin siblings, when she was abducted out of the hotel room while she lay napping. The parents had left the children asleep in the hotel as they ate a meal at a restaurant just 130 yards away (this distance was emphasized in all the media coverage). This is a tale that taps into all our modern anxieties about parenting. A brief scan of parenting books demonstrates our current attitude toward children. This is the era of attachment parenting, of bullying laws and home schooling. The McCann story is told as a cautionary tale about the self-indulgent parents who had a dinner without the kids and how that indulgence resulted in their failure to protect the blonde and cherubic Madeleine.

We find the same story told again in the trial of Casey Anthony three years later, but now the drama has been heightened. Unlike the McCann parents, who were upbraided for their negligence but still treated as victims, Anthony is the explicit villain. In the new narrative, Anthony's indulgence is not a simple afternoon lunch but evenings spent partying with friends. The remains of Anthony's three-year-old daughter Caylee were found in the woods behind her house, months after the child had been reported missing. The allegation is that the mother killed the daughter because she preferred a frivolous life of clubbing. Many of the details of the story would have appealed to baser human instincts in any era: the description of child's decomposed remains, her bones gnawed on by animals, and the forensic entomologist—straight out *The Silence of the Lambs*—who was brought in to analyze flesh-eating fly larva.

Consider these two versions of the abducted child story in comparison to biblical ones that emphasize, above all else, the affront of having one's personal property taken away. Although there is plenty of parental love in the Bible, the biblical attachment to the child bears little resemblance to our modern approach. Even the tale of the Lindbergh baby has a wholly different tenor; it features class and money, and hinges on anxieties about a boogey man, a crazed and greedy German with homicidal intent, something that resonated particularly well in 1932.

In the article "The Effect of Memes, Truthiness and Wikiality on Public Knowledge" (Black 2007) the author contends "every successful media event has what journalists call the hook—the one meme of information that makes the story newsworthy and sustains the attention of the public" (5). Having examined 34 examples of viral student media created in the last three years, four archetypal narratives appear to be in heavy circulation at the moment: the story of the fallen woman, the story of the murdered child, the story of God's wrath expressed through natural disaster and the story of the ruler who abuses his power. If, in the course of constructing one of these ancient narratives, an article uses a humorous or brazen tone and infuses radical views on gender, sexuality, race, religion or class, so much the better in terms of its viral capacity.

Against this backdrop we can see how student media fits into the discussion. Mark Mayfield, the adviser to *The Crimson White*, the student newspaper of The University of Alabama, said he felt that the Internet "levels the playing field," giving student journalists as much chance for their work to go viral as the work of reporters at mainstream outlets. I would argue that student journalists are actually better poised to construct genuine viral news content than any other group. Certainly the popularity of a story may be pushed through the dominant media chan-

nels. These are stories that are marketed for the intention of becoming popular, but we don't say, for example, that a story has gone viral if The New York Times has published it and it has therefore received thousands of reads. What mainstream media outlets do increasingly is report on things after they've gone viral, like the massively viral KONY2012 video. The mainstream did not originate the story that there was an African dictator who needed to be captured, but they later reported on the fact that people were taken in by the video in astounding numbers.

There are several reasons why student reporters are the ones most apt to create serious viral news. One reason is practical; current college students have broad Internet access, they understand the uses of social media (the engine beneath every viral story), and they are accustomed to adopting new software innovations that allow them to construct and post content effectively. Beyond simply having the tools necessary to post the content, something mainstream outlets also have, college students' youth gives them a significant advantage in intuiting the topics that will catch the cultural imagination. As students enter college they undergo a natural shift in perspective that moves them beyond the self and family orientation of childhood to the national and global outlook of adulthood. At this point they are not set in their views, and their academic work requires them to think critically and ask important questions about society and culture and their place in it. Rushkoff writes, "Media viruses spread rapidly if they provoke our interest, and their success is dependent on the particular strengths and weaknesses of the host organism, popular culture" (10). Unencumbered by many of the financial responsibilities of adulthood, college students have been the leading consumers and arbiters of modern popular culture since at least the 1950s. They exist in a swirling vortex of academic and social ideas, popular culture and youthful energy that allows them to pick up on the current cultural zeitgeist without any particular effort. Moreover, unlike their counterparts in the mainstream media, they are not—under the best circumstances—shackled by the obligation to self-censor in order to avoid offending a conservative audience or alienating advertisers. They can therefore be brash and take real creative risks; such risk taking is fundamental to the viral mechanism.

A typical example of a predictably viral student article is "How do I even begin to explain this" (2011), an anonymous first-person account by an Orthodox Jewish student expressing regret over a one-night stand. It ran in *The YU Beacon*, the student newspaper at Yeshiva University in New York City. The explicit confessional employs all the techniques of melodrama and taps into the full prurient potential of the fallen woman narrative. The article went viral from New York to Jerusalem and unleashed a firestorm of criticism that ultimately prompted the paper's news editor and co-editor in chief to quit.

Another recent example is the case of the muscle-bound cheerleader. Here the photo that ran with the article was of particular importance, as is often the case with viral content. It played up the contrasting traits of the heavily muscled but traditionally attractive Anna Watson. The picture helped propel the University of Georgia's independent newspaper *The Red & Black's* article "Cheerleader not defined by physique" (Glaser 2012), to 500,000 reads in a week. With the Republican primaries in full swing, Watson's religious convictions likely added to the draw, particularly among Christian conservatives. One commenter, who used the Internet handle TruthLove, said of Watson's image, "She's beautiful, cares about her health and most importantly, she loves Jesus Christ. Anna, may God bless you with much success and your heart's desires. IN JESUS NAME." To this a second response, by someone referring to him or herself as Sanity Calling, read, "Obviously, Jesus may have some issues with her though. To allow a woman to do that to her body is a crime." Bitter, polarized comments of this sort are typical for viral content. One begins to see why the association of the term "viral" with moral turpitude makes sense in this context, as moral anxiety is a driving force beneath much viral content.

The Trouble With Going Viral: What are the Results?

Once a story goes viral there is no controlling it, and the consequences, even under the best of circumstances, can be vexing. There are two fundamental problems: backlash and erosion. Of the 34 examples of viral student content that were examined for this paper, roughly 50% triggered a juggernaut of vitriolic responses directed primarily at the author, but sometimes at the editor in chief, the newspaper or the media adviser. Another 20% prompted a contentious mix of positive and negative commentary. In at least seven of these cases the student who created the content quit his or her school paper, and four of those seven students actually changed their majors from journalism, communications or new media to something else. The repercussions may be dreadful for the students personally, but even more detrimental to the community at large. As stated earlier, student papers are one of the last places where serious issues can be taken up without fear of reprisal from a parent company or block of advertisers. If student newspapers become fearful and silent, then society as a whole will suffer.

The story of Lisa Khoury, the 2011-2012 news editor for the University at Buffalo's independent newspaper, *The Spectrum*, gives another clear example of the ambushing effect that going viral can have on students. Like many college newspapers, *The Spectrum* frequently takes a topic of some controversy and presents opposing views on that topic. On January 28, 2012, Khoury took the "no tattoos" side of the tattoo debate in an article titled "Why put a bumper sticker on a Ferrari?" Among other things, Khoury wrote, "An elegant woman does not vandalize the temple she has been blessed with as her body. She appreciates it. She flaunts it. She's not happy with it? She goes to the gym. She dresses it up in lavish, fun, trendy clothes, enjoying trips to the mall with her girlfriends." Khoury's article was forceful, glib, perhaps offensive, but that does not explain the incredible response. In 48 hours Khoury's article got 25,000 online reads and elicited hundreds of hate-filled comments, Facebook posts, tweets and emails.

Here's a sample of the 900+ comments that were posted in response to Khoury's tattoo article: "I would like to apologise for whoever brought you up (I imagine it was a shallow, vapid excuse for a human being who you call your mother) who made you think that a tattoo'd body is something to regard with revulsion..." (Bridgman). This response was one of the mildest. Another person commented, apparently referring to a photo of Khoury posted along side her article, "Lisa. Not to sound like a dick, but you are NOT a Ferrari. You are, at best, a 2003 Dodge Caravan" (Bice). Many of the comments Khoury received are too offensive to be reprinted here.

Hate mail is a fact of life for any college media outlet that goes beyond public relations style reporting, but receiving 900 pieces of it in less than two days requires more than a thick skin. Khoury's media adviser, Jody Kleinberg Bheil, responded to questions from other advisers about Khoury's article on the College Media Association's listserv saying, "What might they do differently? Pay more attention to everything they write, knowing it might not just get read within our university context, but also beyond. The wording of her original piece was awkward and came off to many as judgmental" (3 February, 2012).

In one-on-one interviews with several media advisers whose papers had recently produced viral content, they echoed Kleinberg Bheil's sentiment that students must learn to respect the broad reach of the Internet. As Barbara Allen, the media adviser at the *Daily O'Collegian*, the independent student newspaper at the University of Oklahoma put it, "How else are they going to learn that the Internet is ubiquitous if they don't screw up on the Internet?" But my research suggests that most student journalists faced with such a massive negative reaction simply leave their papers (notably, Lisa Khoury has continued to write throughout the semester). This is not necessarily because they are weak willed or not serious about journalism, but more likely because managing the negative reaction depletes resources needed for academic and

other duties. Those who do remain may become more judicious in their writing and reporting, but potentially more hesitant to cover important topics as well.

One example of the chilling effect that going viral can have on student media comes from *The Daily O'Collegian*. The students ran what became a locally viral article penned by freshman Paige Howell. In it she described a new strip club, *The Blue Diamond Cabaret*, that had opened near the college's campus and which was co-owned by an OSU alum. The piece employed a humorous tone, opening with the line: "Jerry and Amber Elledge have made bare breasts their business" (2012). Howell included information such as, "In addition to owning the club, Jerry said he participates in the Toys for Tots programs, as well as hosting pole dancing exercise classes on Wednesdays from 2-4 p.m." It was not the content of Howell's article but the headline, "Diamond in the muff," that inspired most of the controversy that followed, including a letter of condemnation signed by many of the professors at OSU's School of Media and Strategic Communications. The letter accused the writer of the "Diamond in the muff" headline—who was not, in fact, the article's author, Paige Howell—of failing to uphold sections of the Society of Professional Journalists code of ethics that say journalists should "show good taste" and avoid "pandering to lurid curiosity." The letter called the headline a "sophomoric attempt at humor" and said it "undermine[d] the credibility of everyone associated with *The Daily O'Collegian*." The article came out on a Tuesday; by Friday the entire opinions page was dedicated to it. There was the letter from the professors, an editorial and a column reacting to the letter, two student responses that criticized the negative reaction of the campus community, and an article by the editor in chief upbraiding those who had "harassed" Paige Howell by calling her a "embarrassment to OSU." Howell ended up leaving the paper, but even those who stayed behind were affected. Barbara Allen, the *O'Colly's* adviser, explained that after "Diamond in the muff" the staffers joked routinely about "pushing the envelope" with their reporting, but their subsequent stories rarely did so. Viral articles can inspire healthy caution on the part of reporters, but can also inspire self-censorship.

Beyond demonstrating the effects of viral backlash, "Diamond in the muff" also offers up a concrete example of the second key problem with viral content: erosion. One of the most interesting notes on that Friday opinion page read, "Just because every other newspaper in Oklahoma has embraced the religious right doesn't mean the *O'Colly* has to follow suit" (Becker 2012). Allen agreed that being in the American Bible Belt likely played a role in the story going viral, but that the situation was more complex in that the animus came from multiple directions. Religious conservatives attacked the headline for moral reasons, while progressive feminists attacked it on political grounds. She noted that the real issues contained in the article, the questions it raised about sexuality and sexual exploitation became completely obscured by the kerfuffle over the headline.

As stories wind their way around the Internet, the nuances get shaved off and in many cases the story becomes symbolic of something entirely different from what it was originally about: "ideas are shared from one person to another, each person being a generation, in the hopes that the best ideas will prevail" (Black 2007). But these "best ideas" may not, in fact, be accurate or good ideas: "as the meme spreads the odds increase that someone will make a creative leap" (5). Howell's strip club story encountered such a creative leap. Instead of inspiring a discussion about the social issues surrounding the proliferation of strip clubs, it became a discussion about journalistic professionalism and taste in headline writing. It is easy to see how student reporters can become disenchanted and disengaged if they feel their thoughtful stories may be transformed in such a way.

What Can be Done to Make Viral Stories Meaningful and Avoid the Pitfalls of Going Viral?

Having explored the viral disasters, it is worth noting that there are instances of student articles going viral because they are well-written, newsworthy and thorough. In such cases the content is almost always attached to a major, unexpected event such as a natural disaster, murder or suicide. These types of viral articles are the rarest, accounting for only 11% of the articles examined for this paper. They are also the only ones that the research suggests can help their creators land jobs out of college. All five students interviewed for this paper who had been primary contributors on successful viral event stories landed jobs straight out of college. They emphasized their work on those stories to prospective employers and all said they felt their viral effort helped them get the job. It should be noted, however, that while these types of viral stories fall directly into familiar archetypal narratives, they differ from other virals in that they lack the factor of controversy. For example, in December of 2011 the Collegiate Times at Virginia Tech provided comprehensive multimedia coverage of a gunman on the loose on their campus. The story was picked up nationally, but all comments were supportive. Reporters who are covering viral events such as shootings and disasters are more likely to be distracted from their work by requests from mainstream affiliates to use portions of their reporting, than by mobs of hate mail writers. The viral event reporter is therefore positioned as a hero, while the creators of other viral content may well be cast as villains no matter how important or newsworthy their topic.

Naturally student reporters hope to work on stories of great scale and human significance, but it is impossible to predict when an event like a natural disaster will occur. It is, however, possible to put an apparatus into place that can facilitate effective coverage when a major incident does arise. One of the most highly-regarded viral student media efforts comes from The University of Alabama's student newspaper, The Crimson White. Following a devastating tornado strike that hit practically on top of their campus in late April of 2011 (the effects were so severe the school ended the semester early and sent everyone home), they commenced two weeks of solid coverage. Under the direction of then Editor in Chief Victor Luckerson, The Crimson White innovated a multi-platform technique in which they posted dozens of linked articles, created hundreds of photo and video packages, provided interactive graphics with real-time application and used a live Twitter feed both to receive and convey crucial information about things like what streets were without power.

PBS's MediaShift blog said of The Crimson White coverage, "Among its most viral efforts was a Google map providing a geographic breakdown of everything tornado-related, including the path it took, the lives it claimed, the communities it affected, the buildings it leveled, and the volunteer opportunities available to help locals lessen its impact" (Reimold 2012). Mark Mayfield, The Crimson White's adviser, explained that part of the students' success in covering the tornado, beside their endless tenacity, was that they had established an initiative to connect to the community via social media long before the storm hit. As a result, they were ready to use Twitter and Facebook to gather information as well as report it. When asked what other student reporters could do to prepare for going viral, Luckerson said, "Despite the fact that it is rare to go viral, prepare as if it isn't."

Advisers can prepare student reporters by asking them to brainstorm approaches for handling both negative and positive viral events well before they occur. They should be encouraged to consider and apply strategies that can be put into place beforehand—such as Alabama's social media outreach program—so they are well positioned to cover a viral event when it strikes. There are also some failsafes that can be activated to avoid generating negative responses to viral

content. First, thoughtful packaging of content for online consumption is one way to prevent certain viral disasters. In the case of Khoury's tattoo article the students placed note at the top of the online column indicating it was part of a point-counterpoint debate and linking to its sister article, but as web design is becoming more and more sophisticated it is possible to keep the two articles side by side online as they would have appeared in print. Although the text of the article would have remained the same, keeping the articles together might have avoided stripping the article of some of its context, which in turn could have at least dulled the Internet's roar. Another basic guard against having articles go viral in the first place is to encourage long-form journalism. In Everett Rogers's book *The Diffusions of Innovations* he notes that too much complexity slows an innovation's transmission (1983, 67). Here we can reasonably exchange his term "innovation" for "viral content." Even the most staunch investigative reporting enthusiast would be hard pressed to name a single article from ProPublica that has gone viral. Reporters can also keep a lookout for the viral stories that tap into hot button social issues and archetypal narratives, and use thoughtful editing to avoid setting off a massive negative response.

On the other hand, sometimes there is a newsworthy event that will inevitably set off a maelstrom and must still be reported. One example of this is a 2008 story from *The Prospector* at The University of Texas at El Paso in which they reported on the fact that the newly nominated homecoming queen, April S. Dominguez, had to resign because she had violated the morals clause of the post; she had once worked as a stripper at a local venue known as Jaguar's Gold Club. *The Prospector* took heavy criticism for reporting the reason for Dominguez's resignation. In one letter to the editor they were deemed hypocrites because they had run a half page ad for *The Red Parrot*, a competitor to Jaguar's Gold Club, in an issue the month before.

The difficulty for reporters and advisers alike is that the psychological sucker-punch of condemnation may cause paralysis at first. Five days after her first tattoo column went viral, Khoury wrote a second article entitled "The day I met the Internet." In it she apologized to tattoo lovers for offending them but tried to defend herself against some of the more degrading and specious comments. By then, however, the damage was done; fewer people read the follow-up but of those who did, many still posted scathing remarks that proclaimed her apology insincere. Dan Reimold likens a reporter's instinctive response to a deluge of negative feedback to Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's five stages of grieving, in which the initial response is denial, followed closely by anger. When a student reporter has just received 900 hate emails, writing a level-headed correction, clarification or apology may test his or her psychological limits.

Despite the challenge of formulating a response under pressure, corrections, at least, have to be made immediately. For example, *The Crimson White* had to run a correction during the course of their tornado coverage when reporters incorrectly tweeted the number of college students who had been killed by the twister. They quickly removed the tweet and noted the error. They were fortunate that the correction circulated nearly as fast as the error. But many students are not so lucky, like the reporters at *Onward State*, the newspaper of Penn State, who tweeted football legend Joe Paterno's death before he actually died. The tweet was picked up by CBSsports.com. *Onward State's* Managing Editor Devon Edwards resigned over the incident, saying, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, "In this day and age, getting [a story] first often conflicts with getting it right, but our intention was never to fall into that chasm." In his book *Thought Contagion: How Belief Spreads Through Society*, Aaron Lynch writes: "If an idea seems well founded to most people exposed to it, the nonhosts tend to adopt it, and hosts tend to retain it...Of course, what is widely perceived to be cogent is frequently different from the truth" (1996, 7-8). In the case of the Paterno death tweet, it seemed entirely cogent to readers as the coach was known to be seriously ill and his death was imminent. Several advisers

who were interviewed for this paper said the amount of time a reporter has to correct viral information before serious damage is done can be counted in minutes, usually less than an hour.

Beyond corrections, occasionally student reporters are obliged to run apologies, but most often when they receive a deluge of criticism as a result of a viral story, students want to respond with a defense. Such responses almost always end badly, escalating rather than diffusing the controversy. Several advisers contacted in the course of researching this paper said their editorial boards had enacted policies prohibiting student reporters from engaging their critics through social media, editorials or comment panels. Students may find it easier not to have a kneejerk reaction if responding in general is simply out of bounds.

Conclusion

Student journalists' brave reporting, energy and sense of the social and cultural issues of the day are what make their stories compelling. Knowingly or intuitively they use archetypal narratives to convey the news, often with great success. But part of the reason why people may be quick to write off viral student media as insignificant likely has to do with the fact that the proportion of viral student content that goes viral for good reasons—like being well crafted, hard-hitting and timely—is currently small compared to the student generated viral content that is offensive or ill-conceived. Media advisers can help reverse these proportions if they encourage student reporters to discuss and plan for the complex obligations going viral presents.

The following is a summary of the basic strategies advisers and student reporters can employ that the evidence suggests can be most effective for handling and anticipating viral content:

1. **ASSUME VIRAL STORIES ARE INEVITABLE** – College students should be made aware that as a group they have the tools and intuitive skills that, in combination, often inspire them to create viral content, wittingly or unwittingly.

2. **SET PLANS IN PLACE BEFORE A VIRAL EVENT OCCURS** – Two plans are needed.

- a. **Plan 1** –The first plan is one for handling or preventing the fallout associated with articles that go viral in such a way that they inspire a deluge of negative feedback. This plan must include, within the regular workflow, an editorial mechanism that separates articles that may go viral needlessly (because they are offensive or poorly conceived) from articles that will go viral because the content is highly controversial but highly newsworthy. Someone must be in charge of evaluating the content's viral capacity; this person must know what archetypes to watch for and what sorts of cultural issues will inspire intense focus. For articles that are too newsworthy not to run, clear policies must be established for how the newsroom will handle the hostility that will inevitably follow.

- b. **Plan 2** – The second plan is one that prepares for viral events such as natural disasters and violent crimes on or near their campus. Students must consider how these stories are best conveyed and then work to build the resources needed to provide effective coverage. Their viral emergency kit must include the capacity for every reporter to shoot and edit basic video packages, create photo slide shows and envision or create useful interactive graphics. A strong social media outreach program is also crucial and must be established beforehand.

3. **AVOID STRIPPING CONTEXT BETWEEN PRINT AND WEB** –Some college newsrooms are now web only, but for those that print much of their content first and then put it on the web, it is crucial to do so thoughtfully, using every available tool to keep articles from losing their context. Some examples include running point-counter point articles side by side, never leaving behind the infographics that appeared in print and using extra features such as video and audio to provide depth and clarification that might otherwise be lost.

4. LEARN THE LIFE CYCLE OF VIRAL CONTENT –Student journalists need to know how fast they must react when information that goes viral is inaccurate and be able to write a concise and effective correction. They must also understand that viral content faces problems of erosion and that the best way to keep their work from being retrofitted with other people’s agendas is to write nuanced long-form stories that are unlikely to go viral in the first place.

5. STRESS THE NEED TO CONTINUE REPORTING AFTER A STORY GOES VIRAL –Student reporters must be made aware of how significant their edgy, risk-taking reporting is to maintaining a civilized and informed society, and be encouraged to weather viral storms and keep on reporting so that freedom of the press and free speech are not chilled.

The college newsroom is one of the most vibrant and exciting places on any campus; helping students understand their obligations as potential creators of viral content may allow them to do their work more effectively and with greater confidence.

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