



Mass media, the ‘sensational message’, and metamorphic truths



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the effects of mass media's ability to rapidly spread sensational messages. With the view that the accuracy or truth of the 'sensational message' can change, either evolving naturally within our collective perception or through more deliberate ways, this then presents some scenarios in which ever more flexible notions of truth in the future may provide not only challenges but also opportunities. Using different perspectives but always with a bit of lightheartedness, two events that are separated by half a century and a vast expanse of technological advances are presented as lenses with which to examine our collective obsession of the sensational and how this obsession may influence our perspective as well as our subsequent choices. Looking towards the increasingly connected future, the challenges and economic implications of our susceptibility to sensational media are explored so that in the end, the readers will have gained insights on mass media's power to flex our notions of truth.

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1. Prelude

Rumors and viruses are close cousins, at least from the point of view of network scientists. Epidemic spreading in networks is an area of study that is increasingly becoming important in the age of exponentially increasing connectivity, and analogies between real-world epidemics and virtual epidemics have been the focus of several studies (e.g., Boman and Johansson, 2007; Gewin, 2004). But whereas epidemics caused by biological (or digital) viruses spread without the conscious effort of infected individuals, the spread of viral media is largely due to conscious choice by the participants – akin to having been infected with a cold and the symptoms include wanting to sneeze on someone. There are additional important differences between real-world and virtual epidemics (see Boman & Johansson, 2007). For example, statistical modeling on the spread of viral media has shown distinct differences in the dynamics of spreading between different types of networks (see Pastor-Satorras and Vespignani, 2001; Moreno et al., 2004; Nekovee et al., 2007). In particular, within scale-free networks¹ there is no limiting threshold below which an 'infection' gets stifled and fails to spread exponentially (Pastor-Satorras and Vespignani, 2001, p. 3201). Moreover, the rate of spread in proportion to the size of the network is faster compared to random networks (Nekovee et al., 2007, pp. 467–468)². These characteristics have important implications

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¹ A scale-free network is a network with certain nodes having unusually large number of connections to other nodes and the distribution of the number of connections follows a power law. This can be contrasted with a random network where the number of connections is randomly distributed. For those interested in a deeper and more technical exploration of these networks see seminal works by Albert and Barabási (2002), Barabási and Albert (1999) and Barabási and Bonabeau (2003) for scale-free networks, and Erdős and Rényi (1959, 1960) for random networks.

² This is primarily because as the network size increases, the rate of spread becomes faster in scale-free networks due to the effect of hubs shortening the mean distance between any two members within the network (Pastor-Satorras and Vespignani, 2001, pp. 3201–3202).

regarding the dynamics of spreading in the internet given that it is one of the largest scale-free networks in existence, physical or virtual.

Thus, this environment with a highly efficient delivery system is the main setting for the issues that will be discussed in this paper. The object being delivered in this context, and the main focus of the discussion, is the 'sensational message'. Letting loose a 'sensational message' – a 'virus' that the 'infected' is inherently motivated to spread – in an environment that facilitates epidemic spreading is therefore where this paper starts. This paper then follows the journey of the message through mass media and examines the transformations as the message travels from source to audience. The next two sections present two events separated by a large gap in time and technology and yet bound by a common theme that the pervasiveness and persistence of certain messages are dependent on both the medium of propagation and on the capriciousness of the audience. Subsequent sections then present a glimpse of a possible future within the context of this theme and discuss the implications if some powerful driving forces affect the interplay between the audience, the message, and the facilitating technologies. The various seemingly disparate strands are wrapped up in the end, but not in a tidy, dot-point, clinical precision. The final wrap up is, just like summarizing human capriciousness, somewhat messy.

2. Present day—instant communication and viral media

Towards the middle of April 2009, a seemingly unassuming and a bit overweight middle-aged woman stepped into a stage to perform in one of Britain's most popular talent shows. Amidst prejudice and eye-rolling cynicism from both audience and judges, she performed so far beyond expectations that most of those who viewed the entire event got a good dose of that old 'don't judge the book by its cover' lesson. The impact was so overwhelming that within days, the event was viewed more than one hundred million times (Dobuzinskis, 2009) through video clips posted all over the internet. This exponential rise in popularity is known among network scientists as a 'storm' (Pesce, 2007, p. 80), a rapidly spreading distribution of media that starts from a handful of sources (usually ordinary people) and forwarded at first to personal networks. It begins when we see something interesting. We forward it to our friends, our friends send it also to their friends, but the numbers are not exponential and normally the network dies out. However, under the right circumstances, something extraordinary happens. The success of such a nascent network depends on a critical mechanism, similar to the spread and subsequent action by 'connectors' as coined by Gladwell in *The Tipping Point* (2000, p. 38), which triggers an explosion in the rate of spread. This cycle is then repeated several times. A viral phenomenon has begun.

The phenomenon of Susan Boyle – the dowdy Scottish singer whose unexpected performance on Britain's Got Talent on April 2009 caught the audience by surprise and triggered an online 'storm' – is just one of the many actual manifestations of viral-spread dynamics in complex networks, which has been extensively studied and modeled mathematically (e.g., Moreno et al., 2004; Newman et al., 2002; Newman, 2003). There are certainly other videos that far exceed the view count of Boyle's video (BBC, 2006). Videos with quite mundane content, such as a panda sneezing, have view counts that rival Boyle's, illustrating how complex networks readily facilitate rapid spread of even inane messages under the right conditions (Moreno et al., 2004). However, in Susan Boyle's case, the performance and its subsequent transformation into a ten-minute video clip unintentionally managed to deliver a moral lesson as effectively but to a far larger audience than most inspirational books can hope to achieve. In comparison, *The Prayer of Jabez*, a book that is considered quite phenomenal in terms of popularity within its genre, took two years to sell less than ten million copies³. What is it about Susan Boyle's short video that made it so effective in conveying a certain moral message to so many in such a short time? The main reason of course is the emotional impact of the video (Cashmore, 2009) coupled with its convenient packaging. We are simply suckers for the sensational. After all, emotions are one of the primary motivators for us to send the link to everybody in our email address book, especially if it is something that really grabbed our interest or made us feel good (Berger and Milkman, 2009, p. 7). The brevity of the video and ease of dissemination also helped. We are now increasingly leaning towards data packaged in short clips and tiny bits such that a whole industry has sprung up just to deliver and facilitate the exchange of information that can be encapsulated within 140 characters.

Is this convergence of technology, psychological inclination towards the sensational, and affinity for the condensed, a signal for a new aspect of information delivery of spiritual/moral messages? Are the sermon from the pulpit or spirituality books in danger of being replaced with emotionally charged YouTube clips? Probably not. The trick with these viral videos is that they have to be unexpected. It becomes interesting, and hence exponentially popular, only if the viewers do not expect it to give an obviously intended message. Thus, we cannot stage a five-minute clip on the hazards of smoking and expect it to be viewed millions of times on the internet. It is difficult, probably impossible, to predict which videos may turn viral. An interesting classification of potential virals based on their characteristics is presented by Anderson (2009) where videos may be classified according to creation (spontaneous vs. calculated) and audience reception (straight or as intended vs. ironic or unintended). If plotted on a 2×2 grid, Anderson (2009) suggests that those in the corners (e.g., highly spontaneous and highly ironic, or highly calculated and highly straight) have the highest potential to become viral. Of course, the keyword here is 'potential'; viral videos are as predictable as the next teen sensation. While this 2×2 classification may provide us with an idea of which video has some potential to become viral, we cannot escape the fact that the decision on which

³ According to the official publisher Waterbrook Multnomah Publishing group website. <<http://www.randomhouse.com/waterbrook/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9781590524756#desc>> (accessed May 9, 2009).

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