

# Viral journalism: The rise of a new form\*

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## SUMMARY

*Current technological and communicational changes introduced with the rise of social media have changed the way the news is created. By using interesting, creative and shareable content in news reporting, such as infographics, polls, videos and memes, the primary goal in news reporting has become the attracting of the user's attention, and then informing the user. The trend in journalism has become the initiation of the user toward sharing the content – this is why we have introduced a new form of news called viral news. The best example of this kind of journalism is BuzzFeed, a website that has gained huge audience attention and is one of the most popular news sites in the world. In viral news the focus is not on the news narrative, but in the news presentation and distribution. The aim of this paper is to give an insight into this new form of journalism: one that is created to attract attention, that is spreadable via social media and that requires user interaction to fulfil the news distribution process. This new form of news embraces the dynamics and popularisation of the social media and user's role in sharing and distributing the content (making it viral), but also creates the interactive, interconnected, emotional, interesting, and immediate content that can gain viral effect. In order to explain and distinguish this form of journalism, the purpose of this paper is to examine “a four quadrant map,” introduced by Boczkowski and Siles, as a life cycle of media technologies. Through four rela-*

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*tively distinct quadrants: production/content, consumption/content, production/materiality, consumption/materiality, the changes brought by social media and new technologies called 'viral journalism' are explained in this article.*

Key words: journalism, social media, viral journalism, media life cycle, the Internet

## **Introduction**

*“People Are Going To Prison Thanks To DNA Software – But How It Works Is Secret”*; *“Video Shows Texas Police Officer “Pepper Spraying” Passing Motorcyclists”*; *“40 Religious Leaders Have Told The PM A Marriage Equality Vote Is A Terrible Idea”*; *Here’s What You Should Know About The Drug Maria Sharapova Tested Positive For*”; *What Percentage Middle-Class Are You?*” – These are only some of the top headlines in the news section of BuzzFeed (2016), by statistic one of the most popular news websites in the world (Newman and Nielsen, 2015). Attractive and innovative headlines, question sentences, quizzes and listing of content in the news are only some of the techniques BuzzFeed uses today for stories that will inform but also attract users worldwide.

You have to be able to admit that the old way of doing journalism – a way that persisted for hundreds and hundreds of years – is changing, says Susan Older, managing editor of Nando.net (Stepp, 2001: 99). We have stepped in the times of change, and in times when we need to re-examine and redefine some of the crucial social, communication, and media issues, too. The changing nature of journalism is one of the dominant topics in the discussion of the impact of new media environment (Hamilton and Tworek, 2016). The emergence of digital technology not only has raised questions about the role of the journalist in this dynamic media environment, but also has brought a shift in content creation, production and circulation of the news. Because social networks, user engagement, and news delivery 24/7 have introduced a shift in the journalism profession, they also have made an impact on the shift in news creation. That is why this new form of news needs to be reconsidered and included in journalism evolution. In this paper, our purpose is to explain and distinguish the new form of journalism that we call ‘viral journalism.’ To support this trend, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, in 2015 conducted the fourth national report, which sought to map the changing ecology of news across countries. The report is based on a survey of more than 20,000 people in 12 countries, which makes it the largest ongoing comparative study of news consumption in the world (Newman and Nielsen, 2015). The research for 2015 provided further compelling evidence about the central role being played by smartphones and of a sharp increase in the use of social media for finding, sharing and discussing the

news. The data showed significant growth in the use of online video and new visual formats, and track the global rise of BuzzFeed and Huffington Post, companies that have become masters at creating and distributing content in a social and mobile world (Newman and Nielsen, 2015). All of this is affecting the journalism profession in more profound and fundamental ways than ever before. The emergence from traditional journalism storytelling to the new viral and digital one can best be described with the statement by Joe Lambert (2013): “We are experiencing two distinct experiences: in one you are a reader, in other an author.”

In 1999, Mark Deuze, in his article introduced the new question in the field of social science and media research: “What is online journalism and what makes it different from other types and styles of journalism?” (Deuze, 1999: 373). 17 years later, online journalism has become a well-known and well-accepted subject of research. But the fields of media and journalism are evolving constantly. Domingo et al. (2014) had a great answer for Deuze’s question by saying “rather than requiring new answers, journalism studies might be in need of asking new questions.” As Domingo et al. continue, the core of journalism, or what is news, seems to be harder to define these days, and instead of focusing primarily on answering these questions scholars should enquire about how journalism is constructed, maintained and eventually changed (Domingo et al., 2014: 2). With the rise of social media and the user’s engagement, we wanted to introduce a new form of journalism – one that is created to gain attention and to be spread in social-media networks like a virus. To give a deep insight in the journalism change, we examined and embedded our vision of viral journalism within a four-quadrant map, as introduced by Boczkowski and Siles (2013). By analysing within the map four relatively distinct but also very interconnected quadrants of scholarship – production/content, consumption/content, production/materiality, and consumption/materiality (Boczkowski and Siles, 2013: 560) – our goal is to explain viral journalism in terms of what Boczkowski and Siles refer to as the life cycle of media technologies.

## **Journalism meets technology**

It would be impossible to discuss all forms of today’s changes in journalism and news and not discuss the technology, because every major media and journalism transformation has followed a major technical invention: from print, photography, radio, television, and online journalism. Of course, media transformation is never a technical one, but it is reflection and the need of social, communicational, political and technological issues in society of a specific time. As Fidler (1997) explained through his concept of ‘mediamorphosis’, the relation of technology and media is the transformation of communication media that is usually brought about by com-

plex interplay of perceived needs, competitive and political pressures, and social and technological innovations (Fidler, 1997: 23). Digital media technologies have come to play an increasingly ubiquitous role in our experience of the world (Boczkowski and Siles, 2013: 569) but also in a way that journalism, as a profession, is changed. Many authors emphasised the change of traditional values and practices in news production (Boczkowski, 2012; Boczkowski, 2004; Mitchelstein and Boczkowski, 2009; Deuze, 1999; Pavlik, 1997). Many authors have explained the technological and social development of the introduction of journalism in cyberspace and its impact on all media and news processes (Beckett, 2010; Rosen, 2012; Erdal, 2011; Steensen, 2009; Fidler, 1997; Domingo, 2008; Vobič, 2011). As Steensen (2009) mentions, the introduction of technology into journalism resulted in a sea of different concepts that describe similar or even the same phenomena or assets – concepts like convergence, transparency, hypermedia, user-generated content (UGC), participatory journalism, citizen journalism, wiki-journalism and crowdsourcing. As he argues, all of these have accelerated the media industry and journalism profession, and brought completely new skills for journalist professionals, such as immediacy in reporting, multiskilling and multitasking, copy-paste mentality and 24/7 deadlines (Steensen, 2009: 702). Boczkowski (2009: 39) addresses two related changes evident in journalistic practice: the first one is the increase in journalistic use of technology in sourcing and reporting, and the other is greater technology use tied to an intensification of monitoring and an expansion of imitation in the newsroom. Technology not only has had an impact on the media profession and journalism practice, it has also caused several research and new concepts within journalism, such as multimedia journalism and convergence journalism, to have emerged. As Deuze mentions (2004: 139), convergence media, cross-ownership and multimedia newsroom are becoming increasingly part of the vocabulary of contemporary journalism – in practice and education, as well as in research.

In the context of technology, the impact on journalism by convergence is one of the most evident consequences. Whereas a decade ago a typical journalist followed a path that never included forays into other media, today he or she may be asked to cross disciplinary lines (Kraeplin and Criado, 2005: 48). The concept of convergence has been a research area for many scholars (Deuze, 2004; Domingo et al., 2014; Erdal, 2011; Mico et al., 2013) where they perceived it as an example of the sociological nature of a technology – with incorporation of the new devices but also as a change in the journalism profession. Mico et al. (2013: 119) define convergence as the process of social construction of a new technological system for news production that includes not only adapting digital news production systems and devices, but also redefining work practices and newsroom layouts, rethinking journalistic roles and values, and multiplying publication platforms. Convergence is generally seen in terms of (increasing) cooperation and collaboration between formerly dis-

tinct media newsrooms and other parts of the modern media company (Deuze, 2004: 140). However, here the focus is not so much on the user, as we argue in viral journalism, but on multi-platform journalism. The media content is available on several platforms, but, this kind of journalism doesn't involve users as an important part of message distribution and circulation. In the concept of viral journalism, we include the concept of convergence by accepting technological innovations and accessibility, but also we involve users in the media process by their interests and possibility of content distribution within their network. By that, technology is an important part of virality, but also a user's ability to spread the news.

In discussing the impact of technology on journalism, one must consider multimedia in its transformation. Introduction of multimedia in journalism is an important factor in the proliferation and popularisation of online journalism. As news has evolved, journalists have experimented with new formats to enhance and transform the news consumption experience (Barnhurst, 2010; Pauly, 2014). Multimedia journalism refers to stories in which more than two media models are utilized, such as text, images, and video (Pincus et al., 2016; Harper, 2005; Jacobson, 2012; Deuze, 2004). Multimedia journalism is an important shift in thinking about a different, more visual and participative way of news reporting. While multimedia journalism is focused mainly on news production and presentation, with the term viral journalism we tried to explain a more fundamental change in journalism – not only of the news creation and presentation but also in the role of the journalists and in the role of the users, because a user's news sharing is a way of engaging audience with the news (Kümpel et al., 2015: 1). When talking about a shift from online journalism towards multimedia, the content is neglected because multimedia journalism implies mostly visual components of the news. In the term viral journalism, we include rising multimedia features, such as video, photography, GIFs and memes, that are also technical components but also provide a new perspective of the new narrative (with news created as quizzes, listings, question titled, etc.) and distribution of the news (making news more interesting for the users so they can spread the news in their social network). This all supports the new trend that is affecting news reporting: shorter news narratives and more multimedia content in reporting.

### **Viral journalism as a response to the new emerging trends**

With the rise and the popularisation of media technologies, media scholars have indicated the struggle for new journalism interpretation (Domingo et al., 2014; Boczkowski, 2013; Jenkins et al., 2013; Hermida, 2010; Alhabash et al., 2014). As Domingo et al. (2014) argue in their paper "Tracing digital news networks" say that, as media scholars, our most pressing challenge is to provide comprehensive analy-

sis of the current dynamics of news production, circulation and use in the digital public sphere, because journalism studies struggle to capture the diversity of actors, discourses and relationships, and evaluate their implications for the future of professional news production and the quality of public communication (Domingo et al., 2014: 1). The new form of reporting, distributing, presenting and communicating the news, as indicated with the rise of social media, is evident, and with this paper we introduce it as 'viral journalism.' Several authors (Jenkins et al., 2013; Hermida 2010) have also introduced new forms of journalism that have emerged with new technologies like Facebook, Twitter and other social media sites, and their possibilities to share the news and engage the audience. Alfred Hermida has posited 'ambient journalism' as a new framework for para- and professional journalists who use social networks like Twitter for story sources and as a news delivery platform (Burns, 2010: 4). Hermida (2010) describe ambient journalism as an awareness system that offers diverse means to collect, communicate, share and display news and information, serving different purposes (Hermida, 2010: 5). On the other hand, Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013) in their book 'Spreadable Media' introduce the concept of "spreadability," which they define as a potential – both technical and cultural – for audiences to share content for their own purposes (Jenkins et al., 2013: 4). As they argue, it is not so much user-generated content, but user-circulated content, which broadly refers to the need to attract audience attention and engagement (Jenkins et al., 2013: 15). Ambient journalism, introduced by Hermida (2010), the term spreadability is on the mark of the new concept that in this paper is described as viral journalism. However, Hermida's ambient journalism focuses only on micro-blogging and fragmented news, mostly on Twitter and spreadability refers to the possibility of spreading media content within social media. The notion of viral journalism refers to the complete and fundamental change in content creation and consumption provoked by the popularisation of social media and the user's role in content distribution.

As of the second quarter of 2016, Facebook had 1.71 billion monthly active users (Statista, 2016a), and Twitter had 313 million monthly active users (Statista, 2016b). Social media have redefined the way we communicate and interact with products, brands, and social and political issues (Alhabash et al., 2014: 1317). Because of the acceleration of the communication, personalisation and one-to-one communication, we cannot perceive communication as a massive one, but rather as highly individualised. With the possibility to comment and share the news the journalism have become not just media reporting, but communicating the news in a real time. No more reporting but communicating the news. This is the core of viral journalism – the new form that embraces the dynamics and popularisation of the social media and user's role in sharing and distributing content (making it viral); but also in creating interactive (Deuze, 1999; Steensen, 2011; Shaw, 2001; Dewdney and Ride, 2006; Oblak,

2005), interconnected (Deuze, 2005; Marin et al., 2011), emotional (Pincus et al., 2016; Brader, 2005) interesting (Tandoc and Jenkins 2015; Jenkins et al., 2013), and immediate (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2006) content and news that can gain a viral effect.

One of the main characteristics of social media is the ability of the network between the users. This characteristic allows a message to act just like the virus in the network. This concept of media content as a virus that spreads within the network is a main concept for describing viral journalism. By its definition in the Oxford English Dictionary (11<sup>th</sup> Edition), the term viral refers to “like or caused by the virus” and it is mostly used in medical terms. Douglas Rushkof (1996) in his book *Media Virus* argues that in order to understand the datasphere as an extension of a planetary ecosystem or even just the breeding ground for new ideas in our culture, one must come to terms with the fact that the media events provoking real social change are media viruses. In that context, media viruses are spread through the data space the same way biological ones spread through the body or community, and, as Rushkof explains, the more provocative the image or the icon, the further and faster it will travel through the datasphere, and that our interest and fascination is a sign that we are not culturally “immune” to the new virus (Rushkof, 1996: 10). The term viral first appeared in science fiction stories, describing (generally bad) ideas that spread like germs (Jenkins et al., 2013: 17). Talking about new emerging technological and informational trends, Saleem Alhabash and Anna R. McAlister (2014) in their work argue that with the growing sophistication of social media, virality of online content has become an indicator of online message effectiveness (McAlister et al., 2014: 1317). Furthermore, by defining virality, they mention that the term virality has become the industry buzzword for online success: in that context, media content that gains significant attention in terms of viewership, comments, shares or likes is the one that has become viral, and the one that reaches a greater audience (McAlister et al., 2014: 1318). One of the pioneers of viral journalism is the website BuzzFeed. BuzzFeed is a “news and entertainment website that mixes original reporting, user-generated work, and aggregation” (Ellis, 2014). Founded in 2006 by Jonah Peretti, who co-founded Huffington Post, BuzzFeed began as an aggregator of popular and funny content that users shared on social media (Ellis, 2014: 1) and later became known for its lists, short articles, and quizzes (Lafrance, 2012). BuzzFeed relies heavily on social media for its traffic referrals (BuzzFeed Press, 2013). Similarly, journalistic information is being replaced by communication, refocusing news as a form of interaction; a “mode of contact with the public” (Brin and Drolet, 2008: 387).

*Some might perceive BuzzFeed as an agent of transformation, welcoming departures from traditional, especially as journalism finds itself at an economic crossroads. Other agents might impose the journalistic doxa in evalu-*



*ating new player. Still others might frown on BuzzFeed's crossover from the heteronomous pole to the autonomous pole. But economic capital for traditional news organisations is no longer as stable as it was before, and the discourse around BuzzFeed's entry into the journalistic field might also reveal a crack in the status quo that defined the dominant meanings in the field, suggesting opportunities for transformation and new ways of considering journalism (Tandoc and Jenkins, 2015: 5).*

The devices are becoming smaller and smaller and more and more personalised. If the printing machine was the technical invention that provided journalism, and the computer and the Internet enabled the development of online journalism, the popularisation and the trend of mobile devices (and especially smartphones) and social media platforms will mark the new, viral change in journalism. To explain this fundamental change in the way journalism is transformed and emerging, the following section of this paper will provide the characteristics of viral journalism in a four-quadrant map, first introduced by the Boczkowski and Siles (2013). The relationship between the four categories, i.e. production/content, consumption/content, production/materiality and consumption/materiality, is something that Boczkowski and Siles explain as life cycle of media technologies. The purpose of this chapter is to examine “the four quadrant map” and by these characteristics explain the changes brought by social media and new technologies that are called viral journalism in this article.

## **Viral journalism and its life cycle**

Boczkowski and Siles (2013) in their work argue that most scholarship on media technologies can be organised along two main dimensions of inquiry – the production or consumption of these technologies, and their content or material dimensions. As they further mention, the first focus is on the production or consumption of these technologies; that is, how media technologies are created through particular processes and relations, or how they are incorporated into the daily activities of households and organisations through various appropriation practises. The second is a focus on either content or material dimensions; that is, the understanding of media technologies as texts infused either with symbolic meaning or as technologies as cultural artefacts. In this way, four relatively distinct quadrants of scholarship emerge: production/content, consumption/content, production/materiality and consumption/materiality. As they explain, this division of intellectual labour has produced major insights about how media technologies are constructed, how users appropriate them, how the meaning tied to media technologies is created and interpreted, and what the consequences of their social circulation are (Boczkowski and



Siles, 2014: 64). However, as Siles and Boczkowski continue, to have a distinction between these categories is blurred and challenging because, as they mention, imposing a strong separation between production and consumption is often such that it is difficult to make sense of one without also paying attention to the other. In addition, the material and content dimensions are usually so intertwined that one cannot be properly understood without reference to the other (Boczkowski and Siles, 2014: 64). In the following interpretation, the focus of the explanation of the categories is based on a four quadrant map of the field of inquiry introduced by Boczkowski and Siles (2013).

### **Four quadrants of scholarship on media technologies**

#### *Production/content*

Scholarship on the production of content has typically been the domain of sociological research on media industries and institutions (Gans, 1979; Gitlin, 2000), and the political economy of communication (Mosco and McKecher, 2008; Wasko, 1982). Research in this tradition has shed light on the social, cultural, political and organisational dimensions involved in production of the content (Boczkowski and Siles, 2013: 561). To explain content production in viral journalism, we must consider the dynamic of the new media environment and the role of social media in every aspect of journalism, including content production. Boczkowski and Siles in their four-quadrant map say that, in the terms of content production, the audience is perceived as represented by actors, society is reflected through media texts, and technology is largely ignored and not integrated in the process of content production. In the new, emerging trend of viral journalism, there is a significant impact on technology and a more prominent role of audience interests in the context of content production. While Boczkowski and Siles explain that technology is not interrogated in content production, the fact is that the narrative is more and more infected with technology possibilities, especially on the Internet, mobile devices or on social media. As Bruns (2006) mentions, the increasing prevalence of user-led content production, especially in online environments, from Wikipedia to open news publications and open-source software development communities, is indicative of an ongoing paradigm shift from industrial-style content production to what he describes as ‘produsage’: the collaborative, iterative, and user-led production of content by participants in a hybrid user-producer, or ‘produser’ role (Bruns, 2006: 275). With all of the possibilities that are provided with the digital revolution, such as interacting, sharing, distributing and reporting in real time, we must accept and discuss the new emerging trends in creating digital content. The characteristics of the new emerged content can be described with examples from BuzzFeed, 9gag and Huffington Post.

These media started a revolution in the way that the content is created. One story is separated in few shorter news that are written in a form so as to catch attention. With question teasers and tempting headlines, breaking news, tagging celebrities and brands, the primary goal is to attract and interact with the users and to create a content that will be interesting in a whole new way with the use of technological possibilities. We are bombed with all kinds of information and the task of every media company is to win out attention. In order to keep the user's attention and to stimulate interaction, the posts are short, interesting and tempting. Journalism might well maintain its core professional values and techniques, but the digital age has fundamentally eroded its role as the actuality storyteller (Sousa, 2006: 380). In her paper, Susan Jacobson (2012: 1) explains that journalism has become a digital enterprise, and Deuze (1999) calls this a new form of content production as writing in pieces or, in Net jargon, 'chunks of content.' This means that any story can be cut up into smaller pieces and spread out across a number of web pages (Deuze, 1999: 380, 381). In contrast to Boczkowski and Siles's (2013) explanation of content production, in the context of the viral journalism technology has significant impact on news creation and production, but also on the user's interest to share or to recommend this kind of media content. Technology is interrogated at the core of content production because content production refers not only to a written asset, but also to a visual and multimedia one. And the role of the user is to recognise and spread this kind of content through their network, or to comment, like and react to it.

### *Consumption/content*

Research on the consumption of the content has often been the purview of anthropological, sociological and cultural studies of media audiences (Bird, 2003; Jin, 2011; Morely, 1980; Radway, 1984). This body of work has discussed how an audience appropriates media artefacts and has analysed the interpretive strategies deployed by users to make sense of the content conveyed through these artefacts (Boczkowski and Siles, 2013: 562). The scholarship within this quadrant has made visible the practices whereby audiences appropriate media artefacts and the interpretative strategies they deploy to make sense of the content conveyed through them (Boczkowski and Siles, 2014: 59). As they describe in their four-quadrant map referring to the content consumption, Boczkowski and Siles refer to the text as the one that stands in for production processes, and there is no account of intermediary processes. By their observation in content consumption, technology is also largely ignored and taken for granted. On the other hand, if we take in mind contemporary trends: mobile growth in context of accessing the news, the central role being played by smartphones and a sharp increase in the use of social media for finding, sharing and discussing the news (Newman and Nielsen, 2015) we can see an important im-

pect of technology on content consumption and accessibility. In addition, in content consumption an important role is that of the users, or as Jay Rosen (2012) calls them, “people formally known as audience.” With this term, he explains how the audience today is changed and does not want to be controlled by the media. In the four-quadrant map, Boczkowski and Siles in content/consumption refer only to production and technology, but not to the role of the audience. In the term of viral journalism, we argue that the role of users is very important in the process of content consumption. Social media and high interactivity give users the power to debate, create, communicate and share content (Rosen, 2012: 14). In content consumption of viral news, we argue that technology today has an impact on the way people perceive, understand and select the news. From the innovation of commenting on news on the websites in this decade, interactive possibilities have developed like never before. Interactivity has moved forward so that we can say that, today, it is almost possible to have a real-time conversation online in reporting the news. Talking about the role of citizens and consumers in the context of mediated and networked environments, Marin et al. (2011) predicted that future news system would be based on an interactive and connective mode of consumption and production, where media makers and users would co-exist, collaborate, and thus effectively compete to play a part in the mutual construction of reality.

### *Production/materiality*

Scholarship on the production of media artefacts has often been the province of sociological and historical analyses of the construction of technology (Abbate, 2000; Bijker, 2010; Bijker, Huges, and Pinch, 1987; Sterne, 2003) and some work in the political economy of communication (Mosco, 1982). Scholars have conceptualized these technologies as cultural artefacts that are shaped by practices and relations among diverse groups of actors (Boczkowski and Siles, 2013: 60). In this quadrant, the focus is on the Internet as a transformation generator in production of media content. As Boczkowski and Siles explain, content is largely ignored in this quadrant, while audience is perceived as having an “indirect” effect on production and as represented by the actors. In the context of viral news, the technological artefacts play an important role in producing new and interesting content. By that, content should be interrogated in the explanation of the production of materiality, just as technology should be included in the explanation of the production of the content. Today, more and more news is becoming a visual experience rather than the result of basic reporting, with a main focus toward gaining the user’s attention. Huang (2014) proposes several new digital story forms that have emerged from this new media and user environment: interactive graphic, video storytelling, data centres, story clusters and streams, memes and GIFs, social media and games (Huang,

2014: 42). These indicate that the news is not narrative anymore; it has become a completely new multimedia experience. All existing media are translated into numerical data accessible for the computer. The results – graphics, moving images, sounds, shapes, spaces and texts – become computable. In short, media become new media. (Manovich, 2006: 5). This all supports a new trend that is affecting news reporting: shorter news narratives and more multimedia content. As news has evolved, journalists have experimented with new formats to enhance and transform the news experience (Barnhurst, 2010; Pauly, 2014). Talking about new, emerging trends in journalism, Boczkowski in an academic dialogue with Francis L. F. Lee explains the proliferation of media (tablets, smart phones and laptops) as a new trend in online news (Boczkowski and Lee, 2013: 15). He referred to them as objects of artefacts that people utilize to gain access to the news. Moreover, there is a proliferation of tools, different software and applications that journalists use to produce the news, and, in addition, he says that consumers rely on different sets of applications to navigate an increasingly complex and enlarged news and information landscape (Boczkowski and Lee, 2013: 15). Technology has an important and significant impact on the production of the news in such a way that it allows multimedia to have more interactive, visual, dynamic and immediate content. Technological innovations have redefined the way news is produced and perceived, but in this context content cannot be largely ignored, because it is still integrated with the news, and it is still a very important part of the news production.

### *Consumption/materiality*

Consumption of media technologies and their wider circulation in society has been of interest to many scholars (Katz and Rice, 2002; Ling, 2008; Marvin, 1988; Sproull and Kiesler, 1991). Work in the traditions of medium theory and medium ecology, for example, has long been devoted to understanding the significance of artefacts and technological features for communication processes (McLuhan, 1968; Meyrowitz, 1985; Scolari, 2012; Strate, 2006) – or what the mathematical theory of communication refers to as a “channel” (Boczkowski and Siles, 2014: 60). For scholars in the “diffusion of innovations” framework, the consumption of media technologies is largely shaped by features such as the relative advantage of an innovation; its compatibility with the adopter’s context; its simplicity or complexity; how easily it can be tried or tested before adoption; and the degree to which it can be observed by others (Rogers, 2003; Valente and Rogers, 1995). Boczkowski and Siles (2013) argue that in this part of a four-quadrant map, content is largely ignored and product stands in for production process, while there is no account of intermediary process, such as marketing, distribution or advertising. With the rise of social media and user engagement in circuiting the news, we argue that, for the production

of the news, intermediary processes have an important impact on how media artefacts are presented to users and with what purpose, because the goal is to gain the user's attention with creative, innovative and attractive media artefacts in the news. Also, in this section there is no clear role of the audience as a distributor of content, which is explained by the form of viral journalism. In explaining the term viral journalism and emphasizing the role of technology in news production, we must include the impact of the user in recognizing and spreading the news in the context of news consumption. As news evolved, journalists experimented with new formats to enhance and transform the news experience (Barnhurst, 2010; Pauly, 2014). Besides its relevance for the media organisation, news sharing has also altered the way the audience engages with the news (Kümpel et al., 2015: 1). This embodies the core of viral journalism. The concept of viral news and its multimedia focus is best supported by the digital news report by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism in 2015 (Newman and Nielsen, 2015). The report brings data that confirm a significant increase in the consumption of online news video and, as the Reuters research argues, this reflects the new strategies from social networks to display and play more video, and to obtain a greater supply of video from publishers. The research data indicate that the growth of video is part of a wider adoption of new visual online formats, many of which are also well suited to mobile and social media. Examples include infographics, pictures with text, as well as a range of short-form video formats. Publishers are creating more of this content and more is being consumed. These data indicate the trend that users today perceive and consume multimedia, visual and interactive content that can be spread easily within the network. In 2011, scholars from the Pew Research Center concluded that "if searching for news was the most important development of the last decade, sharing news may be among the most important of the next" (Olmstead et al., 2011: 10). The reach throughout social media is becoming the new measure for news distribution. That is why, today, we do not talk anymore about media news delivery or media news distribution, but about user-distributed content. As Vili and Matikainen (2015) in their research "Mobile UDC: Online media content distribution among Finnish mobile Internet users" conclude, the co-production of content and the utilization of user-generated content (UGC) are considered integral to the legacy news media's ability to make advantage of the participatory online audience. (Vili and Matikainen, 2015: 214–215). User generated content is possible due to the rising popularity and usage of mobile phones in finding and spreading the news on social networks.

## Discussion

As the digital report of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (Newman and Nielsen, 2015) confirms, audiences who have grown up with digital media are

exhibiting very different behaviours from their predecessors, and increasingly expect the news to come to them through online channels and in new formats. With the term ‘viral journalism,’ we wanted to explain the obvious change in all aspects of journalism. To do so, we introduced the new term that refers to the creation of the content that is interactive, interconnected, emotional, interesting and immediate, and that can gain a viral effect. This made us think about redefining and rethinking the profession and evolution of journalism. Today, the focus is not on the news as a narrative, but on news as an experience. With interactive graphics, infographics, GIFs, videos, question sentences and dramatic headlines, the main goal of the news is to attract the user’s attention and to stimulate them to share the news. In that context, due to the possibilities of social media and the user’s engagement in the network, the news becomes a ‘virus’ on social networks and its importance is rising with a reach that is gaining on the Internet. Breaking news, cross media, sometimes traditional, often cyber clever and unfailingly interactive is what Robert Frost, journalist, calls “Internet style,” (Stepp, 2001: 99) and is something that becomes like a media virus on the cyber network.

Using a combination of text, image, interactive graphics, audio and video in reporting has become a trend in the last several years. Several authors argue that in new media content the technical innovations and possibilities, as in multimedia, have become more and more integrated with the news (Vobič, 2011; Everett, 2003; Stepp, 2001: 97). This trend has become the basis for creating viral news: attractive, visual and shareable. As Sousa (2006: 384) discussed about information technologies and social change in the case of online journalism in Portugal, she mentioned that technology per se is not a relevant explicative variable, but it is an integral part of intertwined multi-level social transformations. Innovations and developments in technology always stimulate the new era and new trends in society, and by that in journalism, too. Some researches support this thesis and confirm that technology has enabled journalism to become better modelled and to flourish in remarkable ways of interacting, making better stories and delivering information in real time (Kaye and Quinn, 2010; Lapham, 2001). By analysing and interpreting a four-quadrant map introduced by the Boczkowski and Siles, we wanted to apply this model to the new term that is introduced in this paper. Following the structure of the map that Boczkowski and Siles (2013) refer to as a “life-cycle of media technologies,” one must consider that, in contemporary dynamic and accelerated informational and communicational market, it is hard to distinguish between and to establish clear categories of media life-cycles, because technology has penetrated into all spheres of media production and consumption. In terms of production and consumption of the news, the content and the materiality are highly saturated, and in the terms of materiality and the content, users have an important role in media process. In all proposed

quadrants, there is no exceptional characteristic. We cannot consider explaining content production without mentioning the impact of technology, nor can we explain the consumption of materiality without including content.

This paper presents the introduction of the term viral journalism and a platform for a further discussion about the transformation of communication spheres, as well as media communication in that context. Due to the social media influenced communication we state that the term ‘viral journalism’ is only one sphere within the wider concept of ‘viral culture’. Because the transformation of journalism reflects the transformation of society, our intention is to examine the presence of the viral effect in the political, commercial and media communication to gain an insight in overall transformation of the standard communication processes. In addition, for the further development of this topic there is a need for re-defining the role of the users as a significant influencer in news production and distribution. Also, by analysing media content throughout the years on social media our intention is to conduct a qualitative and quantitative study by which we will be able to provide empirical data for this new journalism form. Qualitative in a term of discourse analysis of the media content and quantitative in a term of establishing coding sheet for examination and diversification between viral and standard news.

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## **Viralno novinarstvo: Uspon novog oblika novinarstva**

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### **SAŽETAK**

Trenutne tehnološke i komunikacijske promjene koje su potaknute popularizacijom društvenih medija su promijenile način stvaranja i distribuciju vijesti. Koristeći zanimljiv, kreativan i djeljiv sadržaj u novinarstvu, kao što su infografike, ankete, videa, grafika, itd. primarni cilj je privući pažnju korisnika, a tek ga potom informirati. Trend u novinarstvu je postao poticanje korisnika da dijele sadržaj, stoga smo uveli novu vrstu vijesti koju nazivamo viralne vijesti. I dok tisak, a uz njih i online medijski narativi imaju prepoznatljivu strukturu vijesti, u viralnim vijestima fokus više nije na narativu, već u prezentaciji i distribuciji vijesti. Najbolji primjer ovakve vrste vijesti, je BuzzFeed portal koji je dobio globalnu pažnju i jedan je od najpopularnijih web stranica u svijetu. Svrha ovog rada je objasniti i teorijski uklopiti novu formu novinarstva koje je kreirano za privlačenje pažnje od strane korisnika, koje je moguće dijeliti (distribuirati) putem društvenih mreža te zahtijeva korisnikove interakcije kako bi se upotpunio distribucijski proces. Kroz tumačenje razlikovne uloge ove forme novinarstva, cilj ovog rada je preispitati „četverostruki kvadrat“ kojeg su predstavili Boczkowski i Siles te kroz kojeg objašnjavaju životni ciklus medijskih tehnologija. Putem četiri relativno različita kvadrata: proizvod/sadržaj, konzumacija/sadržaj, proizvod/materijalnost i konzumacija/materijalnost cilj ovog rada je objasniti promjene koje su donijele društvene mreže i nove tehnologije koje su iznjedrile ono što u ovom radu nazivamo viralnim novinarstvom.

Ključne riječi: novinarstvo, društveni mediji, viralno novinarstvo, medijski životni ciklus, internet