Viral journalism. Strategy, tactics and limitations of the fast spread of content on social media: Case study of the United Kingdom quality publications

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Abstract

Journalism has been under much strain in the recent decades. It has had to adapt to the changing rhythms of media consumption as much as to the benevolence of social media networks that constantly change algorithms of how journalism is displayed. At the same time, viral communication of all sorts – from memes to GIFs and widespread amateur entertaining videos – is seen by millions. The purpose of this article is to examine the effort of online journalism to compete with viral storytelling. 'Viral journalism' is defined as the strategy and tactics to promote quality media stories on the internet in order to gain maximum exposure and sharing. This phenomenon is not to be mistaken with 'clickbait', which entails catchy, but often misleading, headlines. This article is based on qualitative interviews with a variety of social media editors and other journalists in the UK: from The Economist to The Guardian. It reveals that quality UK media deploy a range of inventive engaging tactics, but reject virality as a long-term strategy. The media professionals interviewed raised many concerns about virality, indicating that exploiting viral technics may result in reputational damage and alienating loyal readers.

Keywords

Digital journalism, clickbait, social media, audience engagement, memes

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Introduction

Viral communication is similar to a wildfire. It spreads all of a sudden and at a high speed, affects large communities and cannot be easily contained. In media environment, virality occurs due to both decisions of people and the infrastructure of internet communication. In accelerated societies (Rosa, 2013), primarily Western countries with a steady and cheap internet connection and wide access to technology, many actors compete for attention in the public space. In this realm, journalism has to adapt to keep the audiences informed and engaged.

The context is alarming. Traditional media are losing public trust – only 36% of people in the UK find news from journalism outlets trustworthy (Newman et al., 2021). 74% of United Kingdom residents access their news via online means, including social media (Ibid.). The audiences rarely remember the attribution of the articles and stories they see on networked platforms, which further undermines reader loyalty to legacy media (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2018).

Journalism industry has reinvented itself for the digital world – it embraced mobile-first delivery (Hill and Bradshaw, 2018), invested in social media-friendly content (Crilley and Gillespie, 2019), experimented with 'clickbait' subbing, as well as employed teams of social media and audience editors (Neuberger et al., 2019). Yet even for digital-first companies that are strong in infotainment (combination of light and earnest content, sometimes in one story), such as BuzzFeed and HuffPost, the recent years have been a struggle to retain readership (Ha, 2018).

Legacy media organisations have been experimenting with social networks for decades, launching social media channels, blogs, email newsletters as well as investing in fashionable media tools of the moment, from occasional memes and political GIFs to creating niche outlets in the emerging social media, such as TikTok or Snapchat (e.g. The Economist). The changing algorithms of major social networks, however, have been a constant threat (Tobitt, 2019).

This environment makes it worth investigating whether journalists have identified tactics and strategies to push the visibility of their hard-achieved content. Existing studies on viral communication focus on marketing, political communication and public relations fields, whilst the engagement of journalists with amplified information spreading is overlooked. This paper investigates whether viral journalism can be a solution to reaching wide audiences, competing with the flows of disinformation and gaining visibility for quality content. This research differentiates 'viral' journalism from 'clickbait' (Bastos, 2016), which means misleading headlines for the sake of clicks and profit (this profit stems from digital advertising revenues, which may be banner ads and video ads). Viral journalism is defined as rapid spread of media information to large audiences via networked platforms.

This paper starts with the analysis of the existing studies of viral communication, from the concept's application to marketing and social media, to the discussion on shareable journalism and emotive storytelling. It then provides a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with editorial staff at the leading UK media companies. The research aims are to identify practices and attitudes to viral tactics in journalism; distinguish

patterns that enable stories to go viral; analyse media professionals' views on benefits and drawbacks of viral journalism, especially its potential in reaching younger audiences, but also preserving trust, credibility and reputation of the media.

Conceptualising viral communication, from public relations to journalism

The importance of mediators

In digital marketing, 'viral' defines the process when people communicate the marketing message to each other, without the direct involvement or financial incentives from the brand owner (Subramahi and Rajagopalan, 2003: 1, as cited in Miller and Lammas, 2010: 3). The term 'viral marketing' comes from the work of Jurvetson in 1997 (as cited in Nahon and Hemsley, 2013). This type of campaigning is also known as 'word of mouth' or 'buzz-marketing'. Similarly, Jenkins et al. (2013) put forward the concept of 'spreadable media', the content that circulates rapidly thanks to the advance of technology, economy and networked communication. 'Spreadable' content is close to the definition of virality. Jenkins et al. (2013) point to the important change in the approach of many users: in digital realm, people move away from 'destination consumption' (looking at particular websites) towards a more fluid circulation of texts that bypass the limits of digital locations. Whilst much focus is given to human deliberation, it is still underpinned by the design of platforms and sharing tools.

What unites 'buzz-marketing' and 'spreadable' attitude of the audience to media consumption with journalism is the 'two-step flow' communication model (Katz, 1957; Lazarsfeld and Berelson, 1944), which states that influential members of the audience pass information down to their contacts and followers.

In journalism, mediators play a significant role – many people consume journalism on social networks, often via friends and people they follow. Users choose sources based on two principles: those they tend to agree with, and those that are 'satisficing' (Nahon and Hemsley, 2013: 56–57), meaning that these middle men are good enough filters to sieve through the important and amusing, opinionated and thought-provoking updates that help one to stay informed and entertained. Often, people connect into 'interest networks' (Nahon and Hemsley, 2013: 34) based on the topics they enjoy and care about, rather than just staying in the networks based on connections from real life.

The impact of reduced attention span and incidental consumption

Moreover, engagement with information is uneven and often superficial among the users, which can result in the 'viral state of mind' (Denisova, 2016) – this term means audiences with the reduced attention span who tend to form opinions based on headlines, not full stories. The process of viral communication affects users with varying digital literacy differently (Denisova, 2020) – similar to a biological virus, a media 'virus' can have a higher impact on the more vulnerable recipients (those with the limited exposure to a varied media diet, or less critical thinking, or predisposed to react

emotionally to news consumption). They may fall victim to intentionally provocative sharing: one fifth of people in the UK share political news to annoy others (Chadwick and Vaccari, 2019).

Furthermore, the traditional concept of 'incidental news consumption' that has been studied for decades, is obtaining new characteristics in the digital age. Even before the Internet, one would notice stories in a newspaper or a TV bulletin that they did not seek yet got exposed to. In digital realm, 'incidental consumption' means becoming aware of the stories whilst browsing social media feeds, shopping or listening to podcasts, among other online activities (Boczkowsky et al., 2018; Mitchelstein et al., 2020; Valeriani and Vaccari, 2016). This 'continuum' of random exposure to news (Mitchelstein et al., 2020) extends to private social channels, such as WhatsApp, Telegram, text messages, direct messages and so forth. These information and opinion flows are unbalanced and subjective, with a tendency towards political talk and ideological sharing on private platforms (Valeriani and Vaccari, 2018). In this realm, journalism content may be shared to prove a point, but may also be framed according to the sender's point of view.

Viral journalism has potential in this intricate media system due to its core values – sharing information that is interesting and relevant to many parts of the audience. Yet the practices that enable any media text to appear on top of the web searches or in social media trends are complicated. In this field, journalism has adapted through a decades-long history of trial and error, often risking professionalism along the way.

Shareable journalism: entertaining, ephemeral, emotive

Activating emotions for sharing

The comprehensive overview of 461 articles on news sharing in academic journals (Kümpel et al., 2015) revealed that news stories are shared for two main reasons: content and presentation. People spread stories because they aspire to be an opinion leader (Bobkowski, 2015); seek interaction and recognition; they may have a more altruistic motivation of informing peers of what matters and is worth knowing. In addition to these deeper reasons, users can be motivated by immediate emotions and spontaneous reactions (Berger, 2016).

Psychological studies identify arousing and deactivating emotions – the former stimulate a person to do something, whilst the latter create a sedative effect. Awe, anger and anxiety are the arousing emotions (Berger and Milkman, 2010), whilst sadness is a potent deactivator. Rudat et al. (2014) focus on content, rather than emotional response, when they identify controversy, relevance and surprise as meaningful factors that drive sharing. Context is important in virality – in times of crises (e.g. epidemic diseases, political unrest), information-heavy stories travel wide and fast (Kümpel et al., 2015). Yet a point has to be made that these stories are also likely to trigger a strong emotional response of anger, anxiety or awe. This means that strong emotional triggers, matched with relevance and originality, are essential components for the story to go viral.

Erosion or upgrade of the journalism canon?

In the media environment of the 20th century, the term 'infotainment' (Thussu, 2008) denoted the twisted hierarchy of news components, when serious news and amusing stories could be presented in a random order. Many digital-first players, including BuzzFeed, the media that combined memes, listicles, quizzes and news journalism, adapted the principles of infotainment. This fine balancing act led to the criticism of 'buzzfeedification of journalism' (Tandoc and Jenkins, 2017). '(T)he company's own research has found that some readers "don't completely understand" that while BuzzFeed is famous for GIF-filled lists, it also produces "deeply researched and fact-checked" journalism', BuzzFeed's management confessed (Ha, 2018: para 4). The company's wonder faded in 2018 when many jobs have been laid out in its UK outlet, and the company separated its journalism and 'listicle' streams.

Yet still, the borderlines between what is appropriate for a journalism outlet and what becomes clickbait (Bastos, 2016), are increasingly blurry. Current experimentations with attracting internet audience include 'engaging with new formats too, from the rise of visual journalism, live coverage and livestreaming, to GIFs, emojis and memes' (Hill and Bradshaw, 2018: 2–3).

Legacy media brands are aware of the reputational risks of moving their content too close towards clickbait and entertainment. Tandoc and Jenkins (2017) similarly point to the shifting journalistic 'doxa', meaning rules of the game, the official and unofficial code of conduct that professional media follow in their practice. '(I)nter-media influence' has been noticeable in journalism, where media organisations learn from and affect one another in their practices (Shoemaker and Reese, 2013: 113). These comparative checks and balances have led to the proliferation of both 'persistent' and 'ephemeral' media (Bayer et al., 2016) – traditional and emerging, including viral, practices of delivering content to the audiences.

Some organisation fare better than others in this shifting environment. The relationship with paying for journalism is complex in the UK. Whilst Covid-19 in particular has accelerated the willingness to pay for subscription for some media (The Telegraph, The Times and The Guardian, for instance), it is the minority of UK users who pay for online news (8%). The rest engage with plentiful free content (Newman at al., 2021). This creates an interesting environment where viral sharing of material can be seen as ambassadorial content of the legacy media – to attract more subscriptions.

Preference for 'soft news' in social media sharing

Current social media landscape features ephemeral journalism (e.g. The Economist on Snapchat; see Bayer et al., 2016), visual journalism (infographics – see Hill and Bradshaw, 2018), clickbait journalism (tabloids, i.e. gossip-fuelled sensationalist coverage), 'pivot to video' (converting journalism in short videos to saturate the newsfeeds and appease algorithms – Beizer, 2017), among others. Social media sharing favours 'soft news' and opinion over 'hard news' (Kalsnes and Larsson, 2018), yet many media

companies seek to address this imbalance and find ways to re-pack serious content to attract views.

Audience engagement with journalism on social media is driven by a range of reasons (Banikarim, 2017; Beizer, 2017; Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer , 2017b; Hermida, 2017). These include contextual knowledge, cultural capital, geographical proximity, positive or negative feelings triggered by the piece. There is also a peculiar interplay of attention, reason and entertainment when it comes to the choice of journalism. Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer (2017a) call it a 'double viewing paradox' – young audiences felt more satisfied when they consumed serious journalism (e.g. political news) and felt resentful towards 'junk' programming (reality TV, scandal talk shows). Nonetheless, the latter did not stop them from watching the 'tabloid' content. This paradox applies to viral journalism – people may get excited and share pieces that they understand as 'guilty pleasure', even if they realise that it is not proper fact-checked content.

The field of viral journalism studies is only emerging. Previous news-focussed work (Bakshy et al., 2011; Al-Rawi, 2019) distinguished valence (positive vs negative) and arousal (awe, anxiety, anger) as the main approach to study viral journalism. Other studies on rapid sharing of news on social media pointed to the interpersonal aspect of this activity – with people trying to gain likes as well as appearing knowledgeable in front of the others (Ihm and Kim, 2018).

The perspective of journalists has been understudied. This research paper addresses the gap in viral journalism studies and turns to the journalists for answers. Only 4% of papers on news sharing produced in 2004–2014 featured a qualitative method, with the majority focused on US and coming from computer and information sciences (Kümpel et al., 2015). This article addresses the need to look at the decisions, experiences and strategies of social media managers and editors.

Additionally, this paper seeks to explore the difference between news sharing and viral sharing of journalism on social media – the distinction lies in definitions. An infographics about a story may not be 'news' as 'the newly received information' – yet it provides an important bait for gaining visibility for news and analytic journalism. Similarly, features and opinion pieces, memes and hashtags are not 'news', yet they constitute the viral ecosystem of content sharing from journalism providers.

Methodology

For the purposes of this research, ten in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with professional journalists from the leading British news journalism organisations: The Guardian, BBC, The Times and The Sunday Times, The Telegraph, The Economist, Financial Times, Esquire, Refinery29, Daily Mirror.[1] The permission was received from each of them to either use their real name or only utilise the name of the organisation. The rationale behind the selection was quality content, high journalistic standards and reputation of delivering fact-checked and analysed journalism to the English-speaking audiences. Refinery29 may not be a traditional news media for general audience in the strict sense, yet its ample news coverage and popularity with younger audience makes it worth including in the sample. One title in the sample – Daily Mirror – is often

categorised as mid-market tabloid and was included in the study on special grounds – as an additional outlet to compare the trends of quality media against. The interviews were conducted in person or via video call in 2018, with the additional round of interviews or email conversations held in 2020 to track any updates.

The main research questions are: do quality media employ viral tactics and strategies in the production and distribution of their journalism; what are the benefits and risks of having a story 'go viral' on social media? The interviews were organised in order to grasp the practices and attitudes to viral tactics and strategies of journalistic storytelling in the leading newsrooms; identify patterns that help the stories to go viral; relation between credibility and vast spread of information; short-term tactics and long-term strategy of social media sharing and communication. Thematic analysis was applied to the findings and followed the grounded theory approach (Gaskell and Bauer, 2000). Each transcript went through two rounds of analysis, with both implicit and explicit ideas identified within it, to allow identification of themes (Guest et al., 2011): the research was focussed on the main attitudes and practices, concerns and struggles, as well as positive evaluation of the potential of viral sharing. Several rounds of analysis were applied to ensure that the inductively identified patterns were exhaustive. The findings were later cross-checked against the existing studies in digital media and social media journalism.

Findings and discussion

Going viral is appealing, but only once in a whilst and only for specific occasions. All editors agreed with the need to adapt journalism to social media to gain and maintain the attention of the audience.

Visual impact is the key

In this pursuit of attention, strong visual impact is a priority. A striking image has been named as essential accompaniment to any story on social media.

Video has been identified by the interviewees as a potent attention bait, stopping people from scrolling down their newsfeeds. Videos have to be short and snappy, of a particular length. As social media's algorithms keep changing, the previous perfect measure for most networks was 1 min, with the first 3 s being the most important, but now the standard – advised by Facebook – is around 3 min, following the introduction of video advertising (Raphael, interview, 2020). For YouTube, the algorithm-favoured length is often 7 min and beyond with increasingly longer videos being a better bet for viral attention. 'That has a lot to do with YouTube's bottom line, advertising and how to keep viewers on the site' (Danzico, interview, 2020). Short videos with the conversational tone and not much detail (Boyd, The Guardian, interview, 2018) are more likely to spread wide and fast.

Emotion is the mighty 'button-pusher'

However, the visual-based format has to be supported by a story that appeals to emotions. Most respondents agree that the story most likely to spread has to be of lifestyle topic and

generating a strong emotional response. Refinery29's recent hit is Money Diary, a regular series of people's accounts of what they earn and how they spend: 'Emotion connection, human interest and 'relatability' are key to Refinery29 UK storytelling. Our readers want to see themselves and their experience reflected in our content' (Anonymous, Refinery29, interview, 2018). Matt Danzico, former innovation and media lab head at BBC and NBC News, agrees: 'You'd be hard pressed to find a viral clip that doesn't elicit emotion' (Danzico, interview, 2018). Animals and children are well-known triggers that prompt strong feelings in the audience (Danzico, interview, 2018; Silva, Daily Mirror, interview, 2018; Boyd, The Guardian, interview, 2018; Frankel, BBC, interview, 2018). Celebrities and, in the UK, royal family also perform well (Raphael, Esquire, interview, 2018; Silva, Daily Mirror, interview, 2018).

Other topics that increase the viral potency of the story are health and fitness (Park, The Times and The Sunday Times, interview, 2018), eco-living (Anonymous, Refinery29, interview, 2018; Boyd, The Guardian, interview, 2018), questionable fashion choices (Raphael, Esquire, interview, 2018). The practicality and lifestyle angle of these topics makes them easy to read and to share, especially given that most people consume journalism on social media during working hours (Park, The Times and The Sunday Times, interview, 2018).

Emotion is a mighty 'button-pusher' (Boyd, The Guardian, interview, 2018). Agreeing with psychosocial research that identified activating emotion as awe, anxiety and anger, Laura Raphael (Esquire) elaborates:

> "Joe Harland from the BBC says how consumption is driven by LOL, WTF, and OMG. Those emotional reactions are guaranteed to get people clicking, and that's certainly true for Esquire, aspiration still plays a big part too - vintage watches and cars are always guaranteed to go off on Instagram" (Raphael, Esquire, interview, 2018).

The intimacy and judgement of reading Money Diaries on Refinery29 also bring about awe, anxiety and anger, often at the same time, – making people express their opinions too. The same emotional charge can be observed in all viral stories that editors nominated as their major viral hits: from a video of a cruise ship that visits 32 countries in 4 months (awe-inspiring, aspirational, Esquire) to the video of Malala Yousafzai being accepted to Oxford (awe-inspiring, aspirational, as mentioned by Hutchison, interview, The Telegraph, 2018). For the very same reasons the story about a group of Thai boys trapped in a cave for days and being saved by a large multi-national rescue team was a big hitter and sharer, Mark Frankel from BBC (interview, 2018) confirms. The updates that go viral are 'stories that captured people's imagination'; (Frankel, BBC, interview, 2018).

Thematic spin on content

The elements of surprise and emotive storytelling are common to many viral journalistic stories (Hutchison, The Telegraph, interview, 2018; Boyd, The Guardian, interview, 2018). Noteworthy, in order to boost virality, journalists can put a 'surprise' spin on the story without falling into clickbait. Paul Boyd (interview, 2018) suggests an example of a

video feature on the dilemma of whether to wear bike helmets or not. He shaped the video as the answer to the intriguing question 'Why forcing cyclists to wear helmets will not save lives – video explainer' and achieved 300,000 views on Facebook and 400,000 views on YouTube in a short period of time.

A similar spin practice helped The Guardian to promote the story of the cat that belonged to the refugee family and was brought to them in Norway, where they settled, – it accumulated several components of journalistic virality, from using animals to inspiring awe and empathy. The story of migrants reuniting with their long-lost feline gained a lot of liking and circulation, even among people not interested in politics and the migrant crisis (Boyd, The Guardian, interview, 2018). Matt Danzico, ex-BBC (interview, 2018) nominate lovable animals as a viral protagonist appreciated by various groups in society: 'Cute animals are one thing in the world we can all unite around and feel emotions'.

The problem with the high emotionality of viral content is that a story loses objectivity. It is 'difficult to show any analysis through a viral video of the news' or create a political viral video that is 'unbiased' (Danzico, interview, 2018). The second big issue is that facts and analysis have to be cut to the bone, whilst decorating the story with virality triggers, for example surprising or awe-inducing elements. The classic journalistic 'put a spin' on the story approach becomes a conscious viral tactic – with the main twists being increasing the drama or wonder, appealing to identification, fears and aspirations.

Daily Mirror has developed an efficient strategy to 'put a parenting-children twist on content' (Silva, Daily Mirror, interview, 2018), which means centring on the stories that involve young children, schools, sickening bugs, advices on parenting. 'Tugging at people's heartstrings' may be more prominent in a newsroom of a popular mid-market newspaper and website as Daily Mirror, whilst broadsheet titles are still on the quest of balancing emotion and reason. Not everyone agrees with intense 'spins' on stories for the sake of virality: 'It's in journalism's best interest to think instead of just trying to target heartstrings, to think smartly' (Danzico, 2018 interview).

Developing a brand 'personality' on social networks

Being entertaining *and* thought-provoking is a winning formula for many – nonetheless not an easy one to achieve. The Economist, The Financial Times and The Times are similar in their pursuit of being the voice of casual authority on social media. 'We want to be your smartest friend, so that people would say 'I really enjoy following them [The Times on social media] because I feel better informed for following that person who's more plugged in than I am'" (Park, The Times and The Sunday Times, interview, 2018).

The main assets of the less emotive and more information-rich viral journalism are data visualisation, graphs, social media cards, quote cards, maps, short videos with captions, Instagram stories, looped videos. The Financial Times is relying on data visualisation – quotes, graphs, images – and it has polished presentation on social media; now the trademark style being mostly black background with bright-coloured data that gets shared fast and wide (Grovum, The Financial Times, (interview, 2018) 2018). Quote cards are a

powerful viral tool of delivering fact and opinion. For example when FT broke the investigation about the harassment at The Presidents Club fundraiser (Marriage, 2018), the story was presented in a range of formats, from quote cards, short video explainers, to compelling images with main points – which resulted in the investigation being shared beyond FT's own social media channels.

The Economist has witnessed viral successes with its 'social video' versions of written features. Standage (interview, 2018) emphasises that these short video explainers are not simply visual reiterations of the text but media artefacts in their own right. One of the most shared and viewed stories of The Economist – China's sex-ratio problem with high number of unmarried men (3.4 mln views) proves the point. The short video with captions presents concise facts overlaid with either directly related or metaphorical, ironic moving images.

Whilst the easily sharable yet informative social media cards, quotes and graphs are on the rise, memes and GIFs are in decline. All media companies interviewed use GIFs sparingly and rarely utilise memes. Memes do not fit the brand (Hutchison, The Telegraph, interview, 2018). No one wants to look like 'grandpa at the disco', as the editors label these attempts to look trendy but missing the point. In rare cases when GIFs are used, they are mostly original and made by social media teams, not borrowed from the internet.

'Hard news' and analysis not to be undervalued

The absolute main trigger for virality, all interviewees agree, is a strong story. Exclusive, surprising, shocking – but most of all, original. Media professionals stand by the classical principles of journalism 'doxa' and thus confirm that, even in viral realm, professional values have to be maintained. Standage (The Economist, interview, 2018) refers to The Economist's most shared stories as 'the view from the moon' – these pieces discover new big things and come from all over the globe, they stay in opposition to national-focused or 'parochial' approach of many national titles. Some of the Economist's most shared stories were a video on gangs and religion in El-Salvador (580,000 views, 500 shares on Facebook); the links between Putin and the Romanovs (650,000 views, 5500 shares on Facebook); Ocado's Artificial Intelligence and air traffic technology (700,000 views, 5800 shares on Facebook). These stories are united by the curios topics underpinned by in-depth analysis. They featured no clickbait, animals or children. '(P)eople like our analysis of big global themes', asserts Standage (The Economist, interview, 2018).

Engagement of groups and creation of groups

To attract more engagement with the story, three approaches are in demand: deploying content to dedicated groups and fan pages; creating dedicated thematic groups; tagging influential people and groups.

Laura Raphael (Esquire, interview, 2018) explains how sharing the links to content from Esquire in multiple community-based interest groups boosts the interest from the group members and followers. Many of those fan groups become friendly with the media, welcome its content, repost and recommend it, and attend the events organised by the magazine.

Another method to promote journalism on social media is the creation and diversification of groups. To address the challenge of Facebook algorithms, Daily Mirror launched 23 Facebook groups, each of them focused on one popular topic (British Royal Family, Love Island, World Cup and six more on football, one against Tories, one for parenting, one on money saving, etc.) (Silva, Daily Mirror, interview, 2018). Journalists embed stories from the newspaper and website in these groups, asking people's opinions, striking debates and summoning clicks and shares. The role of emotion is vivid in this example – users unite around the topic they love or relate to, and journalists fuel this fire by bringing more conversation points.

The Times applies a similar technique, but with Twitter – the organisation has over 70 Twitter accounts, often managed by the newspaper's section editors. The level of expertise, admits Park (The Times and The Sunday Times, interview, 2018), makes a difference – the most erudite editors (sports and business sections) have been able to build a committed following. The Telegraph deploys forces on Instagram – they also divide channels, and the best performing one there is the Royal Family channel.

The third tactic of viral story promotion is tagging celebrities and influential people on social media – if they share the story, it gains remarkably more shares. Ricky Gervais, Raphael (Esquire, interview, 2018) points out, has been invaluable in re-posting all Esquire's content that concerned the anniversary of TV series *The Office* where he starred – and the articles attracted lots of traffic and reposts.

Moving target – shifting rules of digital platforms

The hierarchy of platforms' efficiency for viral promotion keeps changing, with the everfluctuating settings of algorithms. Facebook, despite having dropped professional media from trending in its newsfeeds, is still the most favoured platform for pushing a story. The Times is using it to gain attention of the 'second circles' of their subscribers – for example the people who are friends of friends of the subscribers.

LinkedIn is on the radar for the editors as a fast growing platform for distributing journalism. It has been bringing more and more traffic to media website (Raphael, Esquire, interview, 2018), sometimes with the rise from 1% to 15% within months (Park, The Times and The Sunday Times, interview, 2018). The stories do not have to be job or finance-oriented. However, the emerging understanding shows that political or business stories do rather well.

Instagram does not necessarily bring much traffic but is important for brand recognition, explain several of my informants. Legacy media like the BBC or The Times are particularly interested in attracting generation Z who are now in their late 18s-early 20s so

that this segment of the audience can develop trust in media brands. Editors maintain that they want to 'reach the new audience there with who we are'.

Snapchat Discover, the section of Snapchat network most populated by users under the age of 25, has been trialled by The Economist and The Telegraph to attract new readers. The virality there is rather low due to the constraints of the platform. As videos disappear within seconds, their sharing value is questionable – yet when people click on the links to the media websites inside the stories, this can bring more audience to journalism. By 2019, The Economist withdrew from Snapchat Discover: 'It was good for engaging users but there was no way to build a direct relationship with them outside the Snap ecosystem' (Standage, interview, 2020).

The best platforms for swift sharing are still Facebook and Reddit. Reddit can be particularly useful when it comes to political journalism – editors and journalists agree that deploying a story in one of the groups or forums can gain lots of traffic to the main website (Grovum, Financial Times, interview, 2018; Raphael, Esquire, interview, 2018; Frankel, BBC, interview, 2018). However, the circulation is hard to predict or orchestrate – in most cases, journalists try to estimate the success of the stories, but organic sharing brings surprises every now and then: 'A lot of the time when it really goes off for us it's just somebody randomly who's read something, loved it, and then is sharing it' (Raphael, Esquire, interview, 2018).

Twitter has been mentioned by the respondents in relation to loyal following. The architecture of the platform allows users to monitor the accounts of the media or journalists they prefer, yet the algorithms of Twitter visibility may constrain the amount of material seen and therefore shared by the audiences.

Disillusionment with viral sharing

Despite maintaining the presence of their outlets on social media, many editors interviewed expressed growing concern about tech platforms 'who can change rules unexpectedly' (Standage, interview, 2020). The focus among publishers is shifting towards building direct relationship with readers through tools such as newsletters. There is also a sense of disillusionment with social media both as a concept and an industry.

> 'Where previously I had seen its [social media] proliferation as an opportunity for newsrooms to adapt their content to be more directly responsive to audiences, I now think that in doing that, the news business has been profoundly changed itself, and has also contributed to re-shaping public perceptions of journalism – and of factual information more generally.
>
> I believe the continued shift of the locus of collective conversations and storytelling towards social media has had epistemological effects we do not yet fully understand, although many real-world negative effects seem apparent (e.g. the political success of leaders who promote conspiracy theories or anti-expert views; and the horrendous terror attack in Christchurch,

New Zealand, in which the attacker seemed to choreograph his massacre for social media virality)'(Hutchison, interview, 2020).

Hutchison (interview, 2020) explains that the social media logic of fast-spreading information is responsible for reshaping people's interaction with journalism: '*Social media and its models of virality have influenced not only the types of stories that are popular, but also the ways in which people understand stories and facts more generally*'.

The main peril of viral stories is the loss of control over narrative, distortion of the message and potential loss of links with the source. William Park from The Times recalls the whirlpool of reactions triggered by the opinion piece by the journalist Claire Foges called 'Our timid leaders can learn from strongmen' (Foges, 2018, see Figure 1). Foges was contemplating on the practices and approaches of authoritarian leaders and compared them with the UK politicians. Without reading the actual article, many people shared the headline screenshot on social media, causing a storm of disapproval – the spread of this story resulted in 'hate-sharing'. Park (The Times and The Sunday Times, interview, 2018) calls the column balanced and reveals that there was not a massive rise in actual clicks on the webpage of the piece. The headline of the article with the photo of the journalist was the only part visible on the website, with the rest hidden behind the paywall. As documented by the Digital News Report 2021 (Newman et al., 2021), only 8% of the UK users pay for digital news. Only a small proportion of those would be able to bypass The Times' paywall.

This episode shows how viral sharing can quickly turn toxic and potentially damage the brand. The finding stands in line with previous research that stated that one fifth of people in the UK share political news to annoy others (Chadwick and Vaccari, 2019).

Hate-sharing, screen-grabbing, reputational damage as the drawbacks of virality

Provocative articles with inflammatory content can perform well on social media, but this popularity is thin and does not benefit the media organisation. The dangers of virality lie in hate-sharing, screen-grabbing, focus on the headline (Hutchison, The Telegraph, interview, 2018). Grovum (The Financial Times, interview, 2018) agrees – no virality is worth alienating the existing loyal readers. Audiences are sensitive to the tone and style of communication. In the times of diminishing trust in the media, any wrong move or false note may cost the audience to a media brand.

Last but not least, the connotations of the word 'viral' have gone through a serious change throughout 2020–21, the years of the global Covid-19 pandemic. Denotation of the word – a medical term describing an infectious disease – has come to the foreground. This development may have obscured the use of 'viral' in the discussions on media sharing. From another perspective, the amplified presence of 'viral' in global
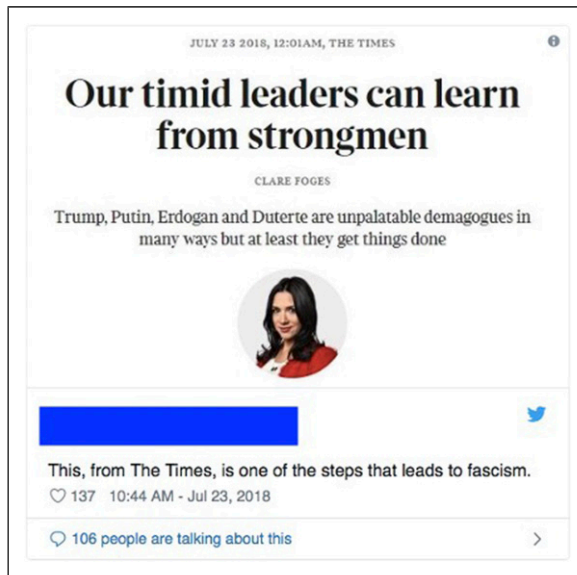
Figure 1. Screenshot of Clare Foges' article as distributed on Twitter.

conversations may add more value to the understanding of how uncontrollable and potent viral communication can be.

Conclusion

Despite the criticism of 'buzzfeedification' of news media and risks to brand reputation, this paper identified a number of working tactics and successful patterns of viral journalism, whilst also distinguishing the difference between viral tactics and viral strategies and the current stance of the UK quality media on this phenomenon. Previous studies on viral sharing in journalism focused on quantitative content and online news, whilst this article contributes qualitative findings and reveals the perspectives of editors and journalists who work with virality every day.

The findings demonstrate that many professional UK media do not give in to the quick appeal of the 'viral' communication as it can have a detrimental effect on brand perception and credibility of the media; an original, timely and well-researched story is said to find its way to the reader anyway, without viral embellishments. The quality UK media do, though, adopt new digital tactics to engage with social media audiences – they distil complex data into smart infographics, employ catchy images, quote cards, maps, looped clips, transform written features into short videos – often with captions – for mobile-first audiences. This research has distinguished a number of risky techniques too – inflammatory headlines or memes may result in 'hate-sharing', dilution of trust and alienation of loyal readers.

Editors and journalists are cautious to pursue viral techniques as a strategy, meaning the long-term approach to distributing content. They hint to the conflicting needs – digital media have to attract clicks whilst maintaining journalistic integrity. UK newsrooms aim to abide by the traditional principles of conscientious research, strong writing and editing to make their coverage appealing to the readership. These findings are important for legacy media and start-ups alike, as much as for journalism education.

Editors and journalists do, though, exhibit a high level of interest in viral tactics, meaning immediate solutions to ensuring content's visibility and distribution. These are seen as the additional toolkit for the content presentation, rather than the main format to engage their readers. UK newsrooms are constantly adapting to the changing algorithms of social media platforms as well as to the fluctuating taste of the readers – thematic groups that many publications create on digital networks are just one example of how media are taking control over content and circulation. Other viral tactics include turning story into a short video, creating infographics, quote cards, other visual material for social media. By doing so, legacy media seek to encourage curiosity and boost brand recognition, when done with measure.

Whilst this paper did not look into the relationship between journalists and editorial metrics (that count views and often push journalists towards increasing clicks on content by any means), it concentrated on the cautious attitude towards commercial platforms that enable viral sharing. Many of the interviewees are preoccupied with the declining trust in news and public understanding of what journalism is, often eroded by the proliferation of the fast-spread soft news, opinionated and entertaining content. Virality in general is treated with prudence as much as with interest – the high degree of emotionality in the user engagement with viral content makes journalistic objectivity harder to ensure.

This study highlights the prominent techniques and inventive tools that the UK media use to deliver stories on social media in accessible but not simplified way. It separates viral journalism from the more specific field of news sharing. This paper proposes to define viral journalism as the ecosystem of various elements and activities that boost content's visibility, rapid engagement and urge to share it. These range from infographics, Snapchat stories, images, videos, to group creation, tags and hashtags and spin practices.

This paper concludes that digital media have adapted to the challenges of wide sharing of content and have been able to keep audiences engaged, yet viral communication on its own is not seen as the sustainable approach for journalism. This research argues that viral journalism is walking a thin line between journalism and marketing, blending techniques from the two. Viral journalism depends on many variables, including the changing algorithms and digital infrastructures of social media companies. Its potential, in the eyes of the journalists of the quality media in the UK, is largely undermined by the growing disillusionment with social media platforms that both orchestrate and enable virality.

Declaration of conflicting interests

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Notes

1. Some of the interviewees have changed the place of work since the interview took place (Laura Raphael, William Park, Jono Hutchinson, Jake Grovum), however, in the interest of intelligibility, their affiliation in this article is indicated as it was true at the time of data collection in 2018. See the full list of names and titles in the Appendix 1.

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Appendix 1

List of interviewees and their current positions.

Anonymous, former Social Media Editor at Refinery29. Interviewed in 2018.

Jake Grovum, former Social Media Editor, The Financial Times, currently at The New York Times. Interviewed in 2018.

Jono Hutchison, former Social Media Editor, The Telegraph, currently at Financial Times. Interviewed in 2018 and 2020.

Laura Raphael, formed Social Media Editor of Esquire, currently at the BBC. Interviewed in 2018 and 2020.

Mark Frankel, Social Media Editor, BBC News. Interviewed in 2018.

Matt Danzico, founder of GrrCo Studios boutique creative group and former inno-
vation and media lab head at BBC and NBC News. Interviewed in 2018 and 2020.

Tom Standage, Deputy Editor, The Economist. Interviewed in 2018 and 2020.

William Park, former Social Media Editor, The Times and The Sunday Times. In-
terviewed in 2018 and 2020.

Yara Silva, Group Head of Social, Reach Nationals, Daily Mirror, Daily Star, Daily
Express, OK! Magazine. Interviewed in 2018 and 2020.

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Anastasia Denisova is senior lecturer in Journalism at Communication and Media Re-
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