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

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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 networks 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). These characteristics have important implications...
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 copies. 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 $2 	imes 2$ 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 $2 	imes 2$ 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

video becomes viral rests with the audience, and that decision is ultimately unpredictable (Cashmore, 2009). We can however be aware of web-based viral phenomena and be more attuned to detecting future Susan Boyles and capitalize on that to deliver a message – while also being aware that others may capitalize on the sensational viral to deliver their own message.

Although we know that the spread of viral media depends on the conscious action of the audience, ‘connectors’ (Gladwell, 2000, p. 38) or hubs in scale-free networks have important roles to play (Goldenberg et al., 2009; Keller and Barry, 2003; Van den Bulte and Joshi, 2007). Hubs are critical to the spread, but they also introduce a factor of unpredictability because of their relatively few numbers in comparison to the overall population of the network. In other words, the collective opinion of ‘connectors’ is more volatile, and thus more variable, than the collective opinion of the majority in the network. Because viral spreading depends on these ‘connectors’, predicting viral events is more difficult than predicting what would appear viral to the general population. In a sense, Susan Boyle’s sudden and extremely fast rise in popularity can be viewed as a so-called Black Swan event—events that are completely unexpected but subsequently result in very significant effects within their sphere of influence (Taleb, 2007, p. 34). Therefore, we – the consumers and producers of media – have to realize that to deal with a future Susan Boyle type of event is not to try predicting when they might occur (by their nature, they cannot be predicted) but instead be aware of two things: that the rare and unpredictable can happen, and that by recognizing them early on, we can potentially influence their impact or piggyback on their popularity to push forward our own messages or agenda. However, before we get carried away with certain YouTube clips, there is also caution that needs to be expressed, especially on our vulnerability to viral media, about the negative effects of assigning undue interpretation to these events. For example, accompanying the millions of views of Boyle’s performance are thousands of posts proclaiming that Boyle had reminded humanity of the true meaning of life, or something to that effect. Taleb Nassim Nicholas, the author of The Black Swan, calls this the narrative fallacy, and sums up our vulnerability nicely:

We like stories, we like to summarize, and we like to simplify, i.e., to reduce the dimension of matters... The fallacy is associated with our vulnerability to overinterpretation and our predilection for compact stories over raw truths. It severely distorts our mental representation of the world; it is particularly acute when it comes to the rare event (Taleb, 2007, p. 63).

This danger of distortion, especially regarding sensational events, is examined in the next section by looking at an event that happened more than half a century ago but still exerts a hidden influence to this day.

3. Mid 20th century—tabloids and sensational journalism

Sometime during the middle of March 1964, a woman was murdered in New York. Although there must have been dozens of murders in that city on that particular day, the apparent circumstances of her murder sparked a national media frenzy on how people have supposedly become callous and uncaring in a gritty industrialized urban environment – a veritable Gotham of the comic books. These were the days before the internet and instant messaging, yet the ‘news’ spread quickly of how the woman was stabbed to death while thirty-eight of her neighbors who were apparently witness to the crime did nothing to help. The ensuing newspaper headlines were so dramatic and the public outcry so significant that it led to the emergence of a phenomenon called the bystander effect (Darley and Latané, 1968, p. 215). This socio-psychological phenomenon was investigated in detail in Darley and Latané’s work where they presented results showing that the likelihood of helping a stranger decreases if others are, or are assumed to be, present (Darley and Latané, 1968, pp. 217–220).

The bystander effect is so persuasive a concept that it has become a mainstay in psychology courses up to this day, and there are still academic texts that use the events of that day in 1964 to present the concept. That in itself – the use of an interesting and emotionally-charged historical event as anecdote for academic texts – would not have been unusual, except for the inconvenient detail that the anecdote in this case is a myth. The Genovese incident is a perfect instance to epitomize the concept of bystander effect. But in reality, the implication of the Genovese incident as an example of the bystander effect was based on a premise that is not true or at least largely inaccurate. More recent analysis of the events of March 13, 1964 indicated several important facts: (a) there were fewer than thirty-eight witnesses and no one had clear or uninterrupted view of the events; (b) at least one phone call to the police was made, and there were reports that at least one neighbor did intervene; (c) the police, who arrived because and soon after the report was made, actually found Genovese still alive (for a more thorough investigation several important facts: (a) there were fewer than thirty-eight witnesses and no one had clear or uninterrupted view of the events; (b) at least one phone call to the police was made, and there were reports that at least one neighbor did intervene; (c) the police, who arrived because and soon after the report was made, actually found Genovese still alive (for a more thorough analysis of the events of March 13, 1964, see Manning et al., 2007). These facts, taken together, describe a completely different turn of events than the media portrayed.

Memory and suggestibility, especially in the context of eyewitness situations, have been studied extensively (e.g., Cassel and Bjorklund, 1995; Mueller-Johnson, 2004; Shaw, 1997). Experimental studies have shown that the process of memory retrieval by a witness affects the susceptibility of that witness to inaccurate recall of what was witnessed. A study by Lane et al. (2001, p. 943) showed that when witnesses focus on a specific aspect of the event (e.g., whether the thief had a gun or not), they were more susceptible to false suggestions, while a study by Novak and Maher (2009, p. 948) suggests that recalling negative emotional events are prone to errors compared to emotionally-neutral events. These results are reflected on a study about eyewitness testimonies on the tragic day of September 11, 2001. In the study, an inaccurate-recall

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4 Even Wikipedia still provides an alternative term for the bystander effect as the Genovese syndrome.

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post-event phenomenon was demonstrated where most people report that they remember seeing on live TV the first plane hitting the north tower, when in fact, footage of this only appeared on TV the next day (see Pedzeck, 2003).

In contrast with the Genovese incident, the 9/11 inaccurate-recall post-event phenomenon came from the primary sources (the eyewitnesses). The 1964 eyewitnesses were largely accurate about what they reported to the police. What turned out to be inaccurate was how the media reported the event and how the audience choose to remember the event via the misleading secondary sources. Whether recall errors begin to form in memory or in perception, the propagation is cumulative from one level of source to the next as both events demonstrate the inherent nature of how rumor spreads and how myths persist in a social environment (see for example Moreno et al., 2004; Noymer, 2001; Wasik, 2009).

As a side note, it is intriguing how the Genovese incident had sparked research into bystander phenomenon when the context of the incident itself was misleading. Perhaps the bystander phenomenon actually exists—that the presence of others reduces the chances of an individual to act in a possibly life-threatening situation—and numerous studies (see Latané and Nida, 1981) appear to support the existence of this phenomenon. Nevertheless, even Darley and Latané (1968, p. 218) are more conservative in their estimates in comparison to the probabilistic odds implied by the Genovese incident, putting the chances of acting in the presence of two passive ‘bystanders’ at ten percent vs. around seventy-five percent chance of acting when alone. If we take their estimate of a ten percent chance of acting in the presence of bystanders, and mathematically extrapolate the likelihood of response for any of the thirty-eight witnesses using the same formula then that at least one of the thirty-eight will intervene. And indeed that was the case.

What the Genovese incident actually showed us was not that thirty-eight ordinary city dwellers had become so desensitized and jaded that they had become uncaring bystanders, but rather that fiction sometimes becomes fact through the telling. It is an example of how we sometimes seek out the sensational so much that we tend to believe in it more than the ordinary. It is almost as if we prefer Gotham’s bystanders than the actual and ordinary people who are imperfect witnesses but intervene nevertheless. How do we counter or mitigate the influence of sensationalism from detracting us towards the truth? As noted by Manning, Levine, and Collins, current psychology textbooks still present the story of Kitty Genovese and present it precisely to illustrate the bystander effect:

As an illustration, we took ten of the most popular textbooks aimed at the undergraduate market. The Kitty Genovese story appears in all of them. In seven books it is accorded its own text box, subsection or picture... All textbooks give the impression that Kitty Genovese was killed on the street where the murder could be seen by others. Almost all texts suggest that the 38 witnesses watched from their windows as the murder unfolded before them... All claim that nobody intervened, or called the police, until after Kitty Genovese was dead (Manning et al., 2007, p. 557).

Do we continue to use sensational but inaccurate examples because they convey a particular point more effectively? Thus, we realize that the attention-grabbing impact factor of a sensational event can be double edged, it allows a certain message to be spread rapidly and pervasively, yet it also allows fiction to slowly transform into truth through each iteration of the story.

4. The near future—virtual worlds, virtual truths

A day in early November, 2016 (or maybe 2020, the crystal ball is a bit fuzzy), was a sensational day. The past few months were a frenzy of hyperlocal campaigns. Individuals created their own customized debates, became hyperconnected to every candidate through persistent and pervasive devices, participated through interactive virtual rallies, and made micro-contributions using embedded banking. This day was historic, for while hundreds of millions cast the most participatory vote in American history, it was also the most commercially successful election so far. The massive commercial potential from a global media perspective has been foreshadowed by the past few elections, but this day floodgates have truly opened. Network and service providers made the most money but nearly every type of business had a share of the profits, from virtual banks to the programmers of virtual political analysts. Within corporate boardrooms, plans are already underway for sequel 2.0 four years henceforth. We the consumers and producers of media might sit back and reflect at this point: if mass media allows messages to be spread rapidly and pervasively, but also transforms truth, what could be the implication if the underlying forces driving some of the messages are far more powerful that just our fascination with the sensational? Two forces will be discussed below - an internal force that results when technology amplifies (or attenuates) audience predisposition to trends thereby affecting the way messages are received and propagated, and an external force which acts on the motivation behind the propagation and targeting of certain messages.

It is a tricky thing, this business of predicting the future, but we can envision a time when our virtual lives are as real as our current real lives. Even today, virtual objects sell for real prices as e-commerce on a virtual environment involving virtual merchandise is thriving within Second Life and online role-playing games like World of Warcraft (Wu, 2007). Virtual properties and their legal ramifications are now being codified in the legal framework (Fairfield, 2005, p. 1047). And there is a

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5 \( (1 - (1 - p)^n) \), where \( p \) = chance of a single individual acting in the presence of bystanders, and \( n \) = number of bystanders (Darley and Latané, 1968, p. 218).

6 Using the same formula, even if the chance of single individuals to act is down to only two percent, there would still be more than fifty percent chance that at least one person will act (i.e., \( 1 - (1 - 0.02)^{38} > 0.50 \)).
running joke about how relationships are not real until they are posted on Facebook. The only difference might just be that in our virtual lives, we will have a choice of which truths to accept. But then again, as shown through the Genovese incident, it appears that we have the same choice in the real world as well.

One phenomenon that most of us have taken for granted yet is bound to have profound implication in the way we live, is increased customization. Barely a few decades ago, we pick up the phone without knowing the caller. Now, not only can we know the caller in advance, we can even program our phones whether or not to alert us at all depending on our opinion of the person on the other end of the line. More importantly, we can now choose which news are delivered to us, which opinions, and which facts7. In both the Genovese incident and the Boyle phenomenon, the observers were passive in a sense that they did not choose to receive the message or the message they received was not expected.

The near future might offer a vastly different situation compared to the previous generation. Let us take the delivery of news for instance. Our parents had a choice regarding which newspapers to subscribe to and which content within the newspaper to read, but they were presented with content that they may not have considered reading beforehand. Today, people can customize their news with very specific criteria8. And so people can now choose to see only the news on topics they’ve pre-selected, and the rest are filtered out automatically. With content shifting to online delivery, it is not difficult to imagine a time when we can completely customize the choice of which performances to view, classes to attend, books to consider reading, and friends to interact with. Of course, there is a thin line between ‘choosing’ and ‘limiting’. Does the increase in customizability imply increased diversity? With our ability to customize almost anything, from our fashion to our interfaces, do we see the era of trends coming to an end? It is interesting to note that in the face of customizability, anthropological research proposes that societal trends could actually be more random rather than deliberate (Bentley et al., 2007; Hahn and Bentley, 2003). Models based on random copying propose that choices are based on herd-mentality (individual choices based on choices by others) rather than deliberate decisions based on cost–benefit considerations (Bentley, 2007, p. 1072). Due to the ease of copying in the virtual world, a random-copying model could amplify viral trends that start as innocuous—instead of infinite diversity, we would be seeing somewhat uniform drifts in trends that appear to jump randomly (Bentley, 2007, p. 1072). In social networks, where trends are a significant influence among young members (see for example Salganik et al., 2006), this amplification of viral trends towards uniform drifts may have unforeseen consequences. We cannot say if the consequences will be beneficial or not. However, as will be discussed shortly, when social networks begin to mine data from their own members, and these data will in turn influence market research in consumer psychology, we could be seeing a feedback loop that could further amplify the effects way beyond the virtual world.

Whether or not random shifts permeate the virtual environment will affect both the future shape of that world and individual sub-realities within it. It is interesting to see how each of us may form our virtual selves. As technology increasingly allows us to create virtual worlds, the same technology allows us to choose whether we accept the voice of the crowds or our own individuality. Along with the challenges of creating virtual worlds, we will have to grapple with social and political challenges unique to the virtual environment.

The implications of such challenges, in the context of the virtual environment, are complex and immense. For example, in very large social networks, it may be possible that the main revenue stream will begin to move away from the usual advertisement-based revenue model and move into data-mining member information – or data-centric – revenue model. Even with minimal advertisement real-estate and dismal click-through rates (see Denton, 2007), large social networks may have the potential for massive revenue stream simply by providing other parties with invaluable insights to consumer psychology and motivation that have never been possible to access in the past. The issues of susceptibility and persuasive impact come to play. Research and debate on the persuasive impact of advertisements have been intense and polarizing (see Hackley et al., 2008; Nairn and Fine, 2008; Wright et al., 2005) even in traditional media (i.e., newspapers, television, etc.). This will be further amplified in the virtual world where personal profiling and targeted advertisement are easier to implement.

It is not surprising that the corporations are among the first to realize the potential of viral media. Thus, viral marketing was born almost as soon as viral media emerged (Brown and Reingen, 1987; Hennig-Thurau and Walsh, 2004). Both are in fact older than most people think. Viral marketing is just a fancy way of saying marketing through word-of-mouth (Anderson, 1998, pp. 1–3) and in that regard, the notorious Ponzi scheme that originally spread like wildfire in 1920 can be considered as the grand daddy of modern viral marketing (see Zuckoff, 2005).

Although it can be argued that viral marketing existed before the advent of the Net, there is evidence that the mechanisms of persuasion are far more complex and subtle in today’s multimedia environment compared to the newspapers, radio, and television during the previous generation (Livingstone, 2009, p. 171). The potential of increased confusion between hype and reality will be only too apparent in the virtual world. The business opportunities no doubt abound and can be found in all aspects within the virtual world—from targeted marketing and platforms, to information processing and delivery (Pearson, 2008, p. 20). As the real-world economics of the virtual environment increase, commercial entities will be quick to exploit (and quite possibly encourage) the realignment of priorities that comes with the blurring of hype–reality distinction. Virtual rights, for example, will pose new conundrums such as in this scenario:

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7 Twitter is a prime example of the advent of hyperlocalised news or opinions, and the emergence of persistent applications that allow us to be hyperconnected with selected individuals.

8 Google News, for instance, allows an extraordinary degree of customization. One can filter news from tens of thousands of sources based of subject, location, news provider, and even the presence or absence of individual keywords. Thus, it is possible to choose to never encounter anything about Paris Hilton in one’s daily dose of news.
People already use avatars, (computer representations of themselves), and they will easily adapt to overlaying these in dual environments. So we might see passers-by as they want to be seen by us, or possibly as we want to see them. Such imaging rights issues will be important. Who has the right to determine how one should be seen? (Pearson, 2008, p. 21).

5. Wrapping it all up—but who does the wrapping?

More importantly, after everything is wrapped and nicely packaged, who does the billing? Whenever we use our mobile phones, we marvel at the ubiquity and mobility it represents. The massive infrastructure and technology platform that makes our mobile communication happen remain on a level invisible to most of us. We marvel at how our devices are becoming more user-friendly seemingly by the minute, but we are largely oblivious to the increasing complexity of the computer codes underlying the applications to make them easier and more engaging to use. Just a case in point: if asked ‘what is the most widely used operating system in world?’, it is very probable that most people would answer Windows. Perhaps a small number (but more likely with a louder and more enthusiastic voice) will answer Mac or Linux. Yet, those answers are all wrong. It turns out that ‘The Real-time Operating system Nucleus’ (TRON) runs the microprocessors within billions of devices ranging from washing machines and small appliances to billions of embedded systems (TRON Association, 2009) and by far surpasses all other operating systems in terms of usage (Krikke, 2003). Most of us never even knew that TRON has existed, just as we are oblivious to the layers of inner workings that underlie our technology.

Indeed, network infrastructure providers deliberately strive to make these layers as seamless as possible to the end-user (Nortel, 2007, p. 12), otherwise known as consumers. We can assume that the primary motivation in keeping the technical aspects hidden is simply to make the consumer experience as appealing as possible rather than outright deception. After all, usability appeal is a major factor that attracts consumers, and thus directly impacts revenue for the providers. The enabling mechanisms of these behind-the-scenes layers will entail technology frameworks and network infrastructure that are bound to be huge markets for service providers (Pearson, 2008, p. 21). In addition, these enabling layers will create additional services and new layers above them, further increasing market potential (Pearson, 2008, p. 21). For example, the layer of haptic technology that enabled touch-screen capability in mobile devices led to the emergence of value-added services and gaming applications, increasing the market within devices that were originally intended for a limited purpose. Thus, underneath the concepts of freedom and decentralization that ubiquitous mobile devices represent, capitalist forces are very much in play.

It has been argued by Pesce that the rise of hyperconnectivity9 is increasingly enabling the ‘hyperintelligent swarm’—pervasively networked ordinary individuals and ‘expert amateurs’—to undermine the influence of the traditional institutions10 and eventually bring about the end of the so-called ‘elites’ (Pesce, 2007, p.76). This could be an illusion. Beneath the apparent open environment of our connected world are forces of economics and capitalism—the hands that rock the cradle, if you will—that actually hold significant influence over our perceptions and actions. Even supermarkets have mostly figured out how to make many hapless consumers forget their budgets simply by changing store shelving patterns, having perfected the fine art of subtle mind control better than ‘X-Files’ type covert government agencies (Dodd et al., 1991; Sharma and Stafford, 2000). We can only speculate how this expertise might be applied to even more serious matters.

Interestingly, in the bygone era before email has become ubiquitous, Kuklinski and Sigelman (1992) provided a more serious and quite revealing discussion on the dynamics of media objectivity in a political context. Of course we can be confident (fingers crossed) that corporations would never use their persuasive influence over future hypothetical scenarios like an election11—doing so would be unethical, immoral, and possibly illegal12. We could hope, though it may be futile, that private entities would never be tempted even if they stand to gain so much from it.

6. We the audience – creation, perception and action

We began by illustrating the power of sensational events in a highly connected environment—even if the ‘hyperconnected era’ has yet to come (Nortel, 2007, p. 1), unstoppable though it may be. As shown by the rapid rise in popularity of Ms. Boyle, in the real world as in the virtual, recognizing viral events early on allow us to piggyback on the popularity and potentially influence its transformation into more ‘sticky’ memes. One of the top viral videos in the first decade of the 21st century, ‘Star Trek’ would never have existed, just as we are oblivious to the layers of inner workings that underlie our technology.

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9 Hyperconnectivity is defined in a position paper by Nortel Networks as an ‘era in communications where anything that would benefit from being connected will be connected to the network’ (Nortel, 2007, p. 1).

10 These can be government, educational, or commercial institutions.

11 Unless some candidates are sensational. For example, the media networks just might be tempted a bit. Perhaps if it happens that a candidate has near-messianic appeal, or if another thrills gossip columns as much as Britney Spears, the media just might exhibit a little bias in terms of coverage and attention. Although Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission (2010) and the rise of the super PACs appear to have taken care of the legality conundrum.

12 In Boyle’s case, the judges and music agents were quick to capitalize on the viral phenomenon. Boyle’s albums were eventually released under Cowell’s record label Syco and Morgan ended up replacing Larry King, despite being relatively unknown in the United States.

13 Again, one must view it for themselves to actually grasp the magnitude of senselessness and come to terms with just how on Earth this video was eventually viewed a billion times. The point here, of course, is that ‘sensational’ does not necessarily go hand-in-hand with ‘meaningful’.
long as the message is sensational. What is more important, however, is how this initially senseless video evolved through user edits, parodies, and participatory development until it became a full-fledged meme, eventually appearing in several mainstream TV shows. Thus, the sensational message has the power not just to spread (and to spread rapidly in efficient systems), but also to evolve. In most cases, this evolution occurs in ways that its original creator had never intended or foreseen.

While we realize the power of viral media as efficient delivery systems, we have also seen afterwards the danger if the message we spread is not true. An event in the 1960s showed us that viral media could just as well spread myths. In fact, given our inclination towards the sensational, it is likely that most viral media are nowhere near true to life. We all know how boring real life is, especially compared to the reality shows in television (or compared to how we portray our lives on Facebook). With the promise of hyperconnectivity, courtesy of Nortel and others, we can only speculate what is to come.

In the near future, we might have to reconcile our psychological affinity to rapidly-spreading and emotionally-charged packets of information with our ability to create or restructure virtual worlds according to our emotional state and vulnerability to persuasion. At the same time, spiritual guides, political leaders, educational providers, and others who have wide influence over many need to be able to grasp the potential—and danger—of the much more flexible notion of truth that is forthcoming. Finally, we end up with a realization that this flexible notion of truth is putty not just in our hands but also in the (corporate) hands that rock the cradle.

This flexible notion of truth in an environment that facilitates viral-spreading needs to be brought to light for those who will be most affected by it—the social networker, the blog reader, the eternally mobile, the general consumer, essentially almost everybody. Just as most of us increasingly ignore the layers of complex enabling technology and instead focus on the top-most layer where everything is amazing and exciting, we tend to ignore the transformative journey that the sensational message had took before it reached us. This journey invariably changes the truth of the message. When profit comes into play, there is increased motivation to influence the content of the message or capitalize on its effects on the audience.

We cannot stop the transformation as messages travel across networks, virtual or otherwise. But we can be more aware that messages and their veracity are not immutable, so that we can act accordingly.

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