The Foolscap Volume 10

AN EXPLORATION OF MEDIA AND WHAT IT MEANS TO BE VIRAL

VOLUME 10

AN EXPLORATION OF MEDIA AND WHAT IT MEANS TO BE
VIRAL

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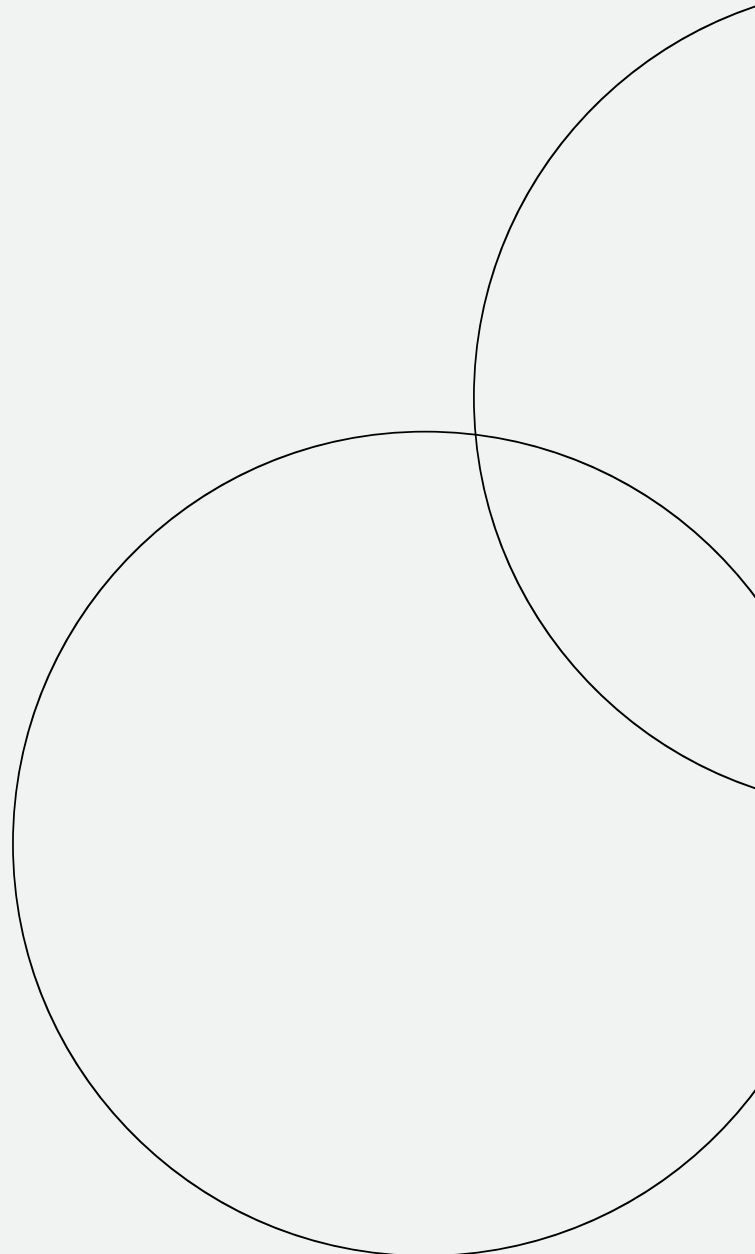
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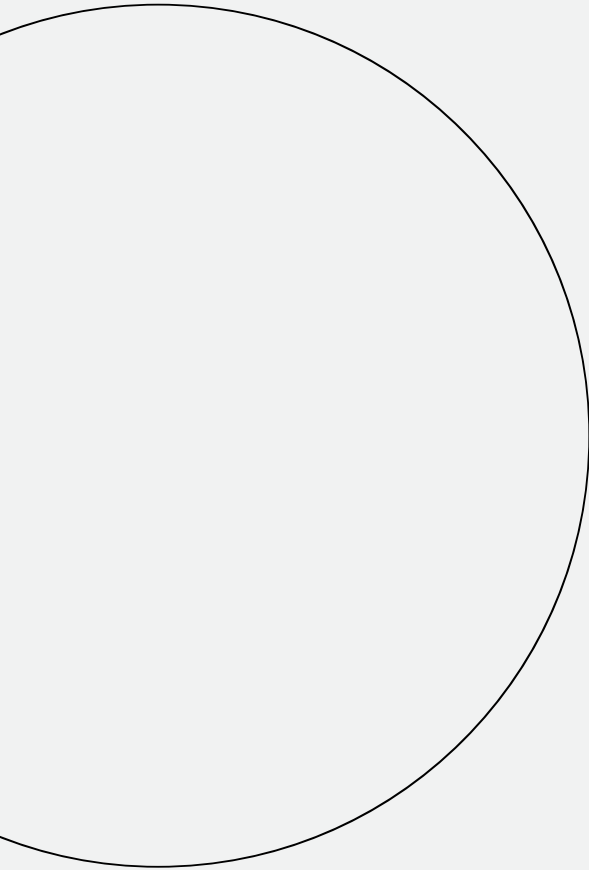
II. A
Letter

HELLO READER,

  I want to start this letter to thank everyone who made this year's issue possible. Specifically the editorial team and this year's BMSSA student president, Lily Li, for all their hard work and contributions towards helping make Foolscap possible. I would also like to thank all the professors who had aided and helped advertise for our journal this year.

With world of media becoming more and more digitalized, the team and I believed that a relevant theme
For this year's issue we invited U of T creatives to submit work which responds to this year's theme: "Virality," an exploration of the possibilities of becoming viral– The tendency of an image, video, or piece of information to be circulated rapidly and widely from one internet user to another; the quality or fact of being viral. With media becoming more and mroe digitized

and investigates the world of media
All in all, read on!
 I hope you enjoy reading this year's Foolscap Journal.

Kind Regards,
Cathy Zhou
Editor-in-chief of Foolscap 2022-23

KHADIJA ALAM

The Future of Journalism

Introduction

The year 2021 has been dubbed the "Great Resignation" due to the massive number of employees who have resigned from their jobs—this phenomenon extends to the journalism industry, but it falls within a larger pattern of journalists leaving the industry. The Columbia Journalism Review called 2018 "the burnout year" for reporters and readers alike due to the fast-paced news cycle that would often focus on traumatic events (Neason, 2018). Nearly 20 years earlier, the Columbia Journalism Review published an article about the burnout that journalists faced; it cited many reasons, from the competitive and precarious nature of the industry to the trauma reporters faced and suppressed to do their work in a timely and neutral manner (Kalter, 1999). A 2019 Neiman Lab survey of 160 journalists found that nearly 60% of them resigned from their jobs between 2016 and 2019 (Owen, 2019), prior to the start of the pandemic which was the catalyst of the Great Resignation. Clearly, something needs to change in order to ensure the sustainability of this industry.

This essay hinges on one crucial question: What should the future of the journalism industry look like? I pull from my personal experiences and observations as a student journalist, as an editorial intern at This Magazine, and as a student in BMS302: The Canadian Newspaper. And I combine that with my secondary research and original reporting on the state of the industry and the progressive practices that could transform it. I aim to make a case for why the industry should adopt hyperlocal journalism and slow journalism, and why it should let go of outdated traditions, and I point to real-world examples of these initiatives being successfully implemented.

It's a Wonderful Day in the Neighbourhood: Hyperlocal Journalism

One of the affordances of journalism in the digital age is that it can connect audiences to media outlets all across the world. The ability to turn to different publications for content to consume can be helpful, but it can also be a double-edged sword as media saturation can make the media landscape difficult to navigate. In an article for the Atlantic, Robinson Meyer (2016) looked into how many stories major US media outlets publish each day. Meyer (2016) found that the New York Times publishes about 230 pieces of original content each day, the Wall Street Journal publishes about 240, BuzzFeed publishes about 222, and the Washington Post publishes a whopping 500. And these numbers do not even include wire stories, which refers to stories written by one news outlet and republished by another (Meyer, 2016). These numbers provide just a bit of insight into how much content is available for audiences to consume. And it is important to remember that these publications are international publications that do not just cover US affairs. So, Canadians, for example, can not only receive news about national affairs from Canadian news outlets, but international ones are providing that coverage too. This creates a difficult situation for journalists and readers.

Since many major news outlets are providing similar products (i.e., coverage on everything), these publications are in competition with each other for the same audience (i.e., everyone). But the readers that they are trying to attract in order to eventually turn them into paying subscribers may not subscribe to any of these publications, whether it be because they are overwhelmed by choice or because there may not be enough differentiating the different publications. Hyperlocal journalism may be a fruitful solution to this problem.

In their article titled "Defining hyperlocal media: Proposing a framework for discussion," Metzgar, Kurpius, and Rowley (2011) write of how the term "hyperlocal" is referred to quite often during discussions about where the future of the journalism industry may be headed, but there is also quite a bit of ambiguity surrounding what exactly "hyperlocal media" refers to (773). Pulling from the work of different journalists who have spoken about hyperlocal media, the authors propose the following definition for their study: "Hyperlocal media operations are geographically-based, community-oriented, original-news-reporting organizations indigenous to the web and intended to fill perceived gaps in coverage of an issue or region and to promote civic engagement" (774). Based on this definition, the authors study six hyperlocal news outlets, all of which they consider to be alternative media (775); i.e., the authors suggest that mainstream newspapers, for example, do not participate in hyperlocal journalism. On the surface, that seems like a given; mainstream news outlets, like the Toronto Star or the CBC, tend to be national in scope. But the L6P project, spearheaded by Dakshana Bascaramurty at the Globe and Mail is an interesting exception.

The project consists of multiple in-depth stories exploring the disproportionate repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic on one neighbourhood in Brampton—L6P is the first three digits of the neighbourhood's postal code (Walmsley, "Inside L6P, "2021). 90% of L6P's population is racialized, 66% are South Asian (which makes it one of the largest South Asian neighbourhoods in the country), and the community had the highest rates of COVID-19 per capita in Ontario during the second and third waves of the pandemic (Bascaramurty, 2021). Bascaramurty told me that because the Globe's newsroom did not have the cultural literacy to properly cover this community, she led a team of freelance journalists who were from the community and/or spoke the major languages spoken by members of the community, which are Punjabi, Hindi, Gujarati, and Urdu (2021). The overarching goal of this project is to spotlight how race and class play into the ways that people in this specific community experience the COVID-19 pandemic; the team examines how the pandemic is about immigration, mental health, education, and more. The L6P team stressed the importance of developing and maintaining connections with the community; not only did they have local reporters working on these stories, but they asked community members to shape the direction of their coverage, they translated many of the published stories into the community's major languages, and they offered every community member a free trial subscription to the Globe so that they could read the L6P team's coverage.

What I find so striking about this project is that it encapsulates Metzgar, Kurpius, and Rowley's definition of "hyperlocal media." The initiative is based in one specific geographical location; it is by and for members of that community; the team conducts original reporting that fills a gap that no other outlet was covering; and the project promotes civic engagement through the content of its stories, which often highlight community members taking a stand for their rights (L6P, n.d.). Although the Globe is not "indigenous to the web" since it is both a print and digital publication, the L6P team is "experimenting with new platforms" (Walmsley, "Inside L6P," 2021) through which to share these stories—so far, they have used the medium of podcast (The Decibel, 2021). Due to the success of L6P, Bascaramurty told me that the Globe is currently working on recreating this project in a community in Nunavut. The L6P project is just one example of hyperlocal journalism, but the fact that the Globe, which is Canada's national newspaper, is embarking on another hyperlocal project suggests that hyperlocal journalism could very well be an important part of this industry's future. A Media Insight Project study suggests that a common catalyst for people subscribing to a newspaper is a free trial, and a common reason for people to stay subscribed is if the newspaper provides them with "access to local news" (2018). So, audiences might be better off for a shift towards hyperlocal journalism as it would allow them to cut through the noise of media saturation and get to the local stories that are most important to them. And making long-lasting connections with specific communities to keep them subscribed may make for a more lucrative business model for newspapers, as opposed to trying to appeal to the entire, nebulous general public.

Slow and Steady Wins the Race: Slow Journalism
The 24-hour news cycle seems to be the major defining feature of modern journalism. If you look at the Twitter profile of any legacy news publication, you'll see stories being posted every few minutes. Broadcast news has also shifted from a specific time slot on television to video clips circulating at any given moment on social media. But in "What is Slow Journalism?" Megan Le Masurier (2014) suggests that interrogating that association between "news" and "journalism" may in turn help us disentangle "journalism" from "speed and instantaneity." Through a consideration of the myriad ways that many theorists and practitioners conceive of "slow journalism," Le Masurier highlights a few characteristics of this type of reporting: writers spend more time investigating and/or reflecting on the story; the story is told through a narrative; the story avoids being clickbait-y; sources and writers are treated ethically throughout the editorial process; journalists are transparent with readers about their sources; the story is focused on and relevant to a particular community; the process is non-competitive; there are opportunities for co-production; and the stories are not published so frequently (143). Le Masurier notes that many of these components are already found in the journalism produced at magazines (141), but that "it is highly unlikely that the "luxury" of long-form journalism will ever have the power or reach to challenge the dominant culture of fast news" (142).

After a conversation with Philip Crawley, the Globe's publisher, I am a bit more hopeful than Le Masurier because the tides seem to be turning. The Globe, through its AI analytic software, has found that its audience has a growing appetite for longform journalism that features more investigation and insight. Crawley also told me that the Globe's Saturday paper is its most popular—it is also the publication's print edition that includes the longer reads. Newspapers did not typically publish longform journalism because that type of reporting would be taken care of by magazines; according to Crawley, magazines are fading, which is opening up the opportunity for newspapers to fulfill readers' desire for longer reads that inevitably take more time and care to produce.

I brought up Crawley's comments with Lisa Whittington-Hill, publisher of This Magazine, and although she disagreed with the notion of magazines dying out or losing relevancy, she too emphasized the power of longform journalism and that it's something readers crave. Investigative reporting is an important subset of longform journalism, and according to Editor-in-Chief Tara-Michelle, This used to publish a lot of longform investigations, but had to stop because they no longer have the resources to pay writers to report on a story for long periods of time, to pay for things such a freedom of information act requests, or to hire a lawyer if someone tries to sue them for libel. While This still practices slow journalism through other types of longform stories and through their longer production process, it seems that the widespread adoption of slow journalism may be in the hands of newspapers that have the money to commission longform reporting and the influence to enact change within the industry and among the perception of the general public.

Thankfully, David Walmsley, editor-in-chief of *the Globe*, is adopting an attitude towards news that is in tune with the elements of slow journalism. Walmsley told me that he doesn't believe in deadlines because he doesn't believe in time as pressure. Typically, in newsrooms, a reporter receives an assignment in the morning, and they would need to file the story by 6pm that day. Walmsley prefers less time-sensitive stories; moving away from the time-based structure of typical newsrooms allows reporters to speak with more varied sources (not just the ones that are available at any given time), and it also allows a publication to republish stories months after they were originally published because they are not just about one specific moment in time. Hearing this from the head of the most influential newsroom in the country was exciting but also quite shocking because this approach is not what people think of when they think of "news."

The widespread adoption of slow journalism may feel like an impossible feat because slow journalism requires the industry to rethink news from the ground up. There are also considerations on the business side, since longform journalism is also a lot more expensive to produce. But such an endeavor might be fruitful for

myriad reasons. One such reason that I have come to realize through my research is that the ways that journalists have produced news in the past (and the ways that journalists continue to produce news) has created a longstanding and intimate connection between reporters and the police—one that can be detrimental to the public, and disenfranchised populations in particular. Since my primary interest of research throughout this project has been about what the future of journalism could look like, I also looked into the history of the industry.

Reporting on crime has always been, and continues to be, central to journalism. In an Oxford seminar, notable crime reporter Duncan Campbell asserted that "crime reporting is the first and one of the purest forms of journalism" (Jacomella, 2010). Crone (2007) writes that crime reporting has been characteristic of Western newspapers since at least the eighteenth century (1). The act of publishing news about crime only grew in popularity, and by the end of the nineteenth century in Britain, "almost all news about crime was disseminated to the British public by the newspaper" (Crone, 2007, 5). But a major issue here is that the information about crime that journalists disseminate to the public is largely sourced from the police. Due to the 24-hour news cycle, reporters are constantly working under tight deadlines to churn out stories—when it comes to reporting on crime, journalists may feel a sense of urgency in reporting on a developing crime-related story because this kind of work is often considered to be a public service. But this temporal pressure means that it is often more efficient for reporters to contact police for information about a crime rather than other involved parties who may be less inclined to speak with a journalist, such as the suspect, victim, or their friends, family, and neighbours (Kilgo, 2021). This gives the police immense power in shaping the narrative surrounding an arrest—a power that they have sometimes abused by misrepresenting events. Take, for example, the Minneapolis Police Department's statement following the murder of George Floyd. It noted that "the 'suspect' had 'physically resisted' and died after 'suffering medical distress.' It [did] not say that an officer had Floyd pinned to the ground with a knee on his neck for more than nine minutes" (Kilgo, 2021).

  There are myriad reasons why the industry should practice slow journalism to sustain its future. Although, if mainstream, legacy newsrooms adopt elements of slow journalism, it would likely be for the earlier reasons I detailed—that it might help newsrooms retain journalists and that readers enjoy longform and investigative stories. This is because, despite police often infringing on the rights of journalists—most recently seen at the Wet'suwet'en protests—an opposition to the police can be viewed as activism. And any sort of advocacy that journalists engage in is often perceived negatively by senior journalists and the public. But the tides seem to be shifting.

Conclusion

It's my understanding that the contemporary journalism industry has long been in for a reckoning. It seems to be a generally accepted fact that the industry is in trouble; from the declining public trust in the media to the notion that "journalism is dying." And I am far from alone in inquiring into what the future of the industry could and should look like. In order to determine what newsrooms should look like, the Canadian Association of Journalists launched an investigation into what they currently look like. In November, they published their findings in "Canada's first representative survey of diversity in media" (CAJ, 2021).

n media, and they outnumber BIPOC journalists at every level in the newsroom hierarchy, but especially when it comes to leadership positions; they make up 81.9% of supervisors, 76% of full-time workers, 66.4% of part-time workers, and 52.7% of interns (CAJ, 2021). But the CAJ's data is also severely limited. Of the 636 media outlets they contacted to participate in the survey, they only received 147 "complete and verified" responses; moreover, they did not receive responses from 379 outlets, and 15 outlets declined to participate in the survey (CAJ, 2021). The fact that the CAJ couldn't get ahold of most of the media executives they contacted is an issue in and of itself. If Canadian media is to adapt to become more representative of the general population, then it requires everyone to come to terms with the current state of the industry. How can we implement changes if we don't explicitly state what needs to change? Furthermore, it's likely that the data the CAJ did collect came from more progressive publications that might be more inclined to participate in a diversity survey and might have more diverse newsrooms —if so, the actual diversity data might be more bleak than we think.

Jessica Johnson, editor-in-chief of *the Walrus*, was able to contact the leaders of several Canadian media outlets while reporting for an essay published a few weeks ago titled "Journalism's Wicked Problem: Save What's Lost or Invest in What's New?" In the essay, she writes that she specifically asked these senior level journalists, "What could—and should—the industry look like in the next five to ten years?" (Johnson, 2021). Johnson focuses on the precarity of journalism business-wise, something that was outside the scope of my research, but is a crucial point of inquiry nevertheless. The advertising business model is long dead thanks to companies such as Google and Facebook, and the subscription model does not work for every publication because people are increasingly averse to paying for news (Johnson, 2021). And yet, Johnson's essay provides me with a bit of hope for the future of journalism. She lists *the Local*, a digital start-up publication, as a success story in the industry as they have not only been producing award-winning journalism, but they also have a steady readership that supports them (Johnson, 2021).

What stood out to me is that Tai Hyunh, the Local's editor-in-chief stated that the publication's "bread and butter is hyperlocal" (Johnson, 2021). Johnson suggests that there are several trends that we are beginning to see in the industry that could protect its future: the editorial side includes moving away from large publications covering everything and towards digital start-ups that focus on niches, and the business side includes models that work with readers' financial support and government funding (Johnson, 2021). But what's most important is that individual journalists, or even individual publications, cannot change the industry alone; implementing changes to make the industry better—and perhaps even to save it from its own demise—is necessarily an endeavor that requires industry-wide collaboration.

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AGATA MOCIANI

The Shortcomings of The Every

What would happen if the world's most powerful corporations eviscerated all of our remaining privacy through digital surveillance? Dave Eggers' self-indulgent sequel to *The Circle* seeks to answer this question while exploring how various aspects of our tech-reliant, capitalist society intersect to pose an inescapable threat to our freedom.

The novel begins after the corporation central to Eggers' previous book buys Amazon and renames itself The Every, securing unlimited societal influence. Like a more advanced, contemporary iteration of Orwell's Big Brother, the omniscient monopoly monitors citizens' every move and bleeds into every aspect of their lives. When we first meet our protagonist, Delaney Wells, she is preparing for a job interview at The Every, the same totalitarian tech giant that negatively impacted her family's livelihood. Within the first few chapters, it is revealed that Delaney intends to dismantle The Every from within. In a conversation with her roommate, Wes, she outlines her plan, declaring: "We inject the place with poisonous ideas, the Every adopts them, promotes them, and pushes them into the collective bloodstream of the world's people" (166). Humouring her drug-related metaphor, Wes quips that the masses will 'overdose'. Delaney begins pitching invasive app ideas at work, hoping the increasingly outrageous programs will spur users' resistance. As she watches her inventions come to fruition, she discovers that, as with any addiction, digital overdose does not always lead to recovery.

  Though the book's premise is exciting and culturally relevant, the message overshadows any sense of storytelling. Heavy-handed warnings about the Internet, social media, and those controlling it permeate The Every. At times, the lack of subtlety feels almost condescending to the reader's intelligence. For example, Eggers repeatedly punctuates the text with overt explanations in the form of letters from Delaney's free-thinking professor. Is this out of concern that some readers may not understand the –glaringly obvious– overarching message of the novel? Though the information relayed within these epistolary passages is correct, its inclusion feels like a thinly-veiled justification for the author to employ unfettered exposition. Likewise, once Delaney joins The Every, Eggers uses the character's newcomer status as an excuse to embark on a long tour of the corporation's departments. Each branch that Delaney visits during her rotation serves as a backdrop for the author's didactic rants about topics he could not otherwise integrate into the text. The repetition and inorganic writing make for a tedious reading experience.

The cast of The Every is unremarkable: for all its diversity, the characters blend together. The spandex-clad, tech-addicted employees that Delaney meets lack depth, making it increasingly challenging for the reader to keep track of them, tell them apart, or care about their fates. It is difficult to determine whether the

characters are poorly developed due to lazy writing or because Eggers wants the reader to know that humans can't exist as multi-faceted beings in a post-privacy, chronically online world. Even if the latter is true, it's undeniable that Delaney's coworkers only exist as a device to explain the corporation's functions to her (and, by extension, the reader). Much like his other writing, the dialogue Eggers composes for them sounds forced.

Similarly, Delaney is a generic character. Like Winston in George Orwell's 1984, she symbolizes the concept of resistance, which prevents her from existing as a fleshed-out individual. Opposing the oppressive status quo is not enough to render a fictional figure relatable or worthy of attention. After spending 575 pages following Delaney, the reader is told that "No one seemed to know Delaney Wells or would miss her," and I am inclined to agree.

This is where one of the novel's greatest narrative weaknesses lies: for the story to be effective, we *should* feel compelled to care about what happens to Delaney, as well as the wider cast of *The Every.* Authors of dystopian novels should strive to humanize their characters, including those who are cogs in the machine of capitalism. Eggers attempts to make up for his lack of characterization by periodically reminding the reader that the corporation's workers have families and lives outside their jobs. Still, his appeal to emotion is not enough. If the reader cannot root for or relate to ordinary people enslaved by a surveillance state, how can they be moved by the consequences that befall them? How can they draw connections between their own experiences and those of the dramatis personae? Had Eggers' characters been more than the equivalent of cardboard cutouts, the novel might have had a more nuanced, thought-provoking effect on readers instead of spurring apathy.

Eggers' argument is valid, and the text's relevance to Media Studies scholars is evident. After all, The Every accurately exemplifies the dangers of mass surveillance, monopolies, and collective numbness in the digital age. Despite agreeing with the novel's general message, I find the execution cumbersome. It is too long for a book populated by underdeveloped, un-relatable characters. Moreover, the author's tendency to resort to exposition restricts the narrative momentum. "The Every" is a well-researched treatise on topics explored in the field of media studies, but it's a manifesto, not a quality piece of dystopian fiction.

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KEXIN XIA

How the Divine Damsel of Devastation Got Viral

How far can a video game, a modern electronic medium, go to promote a nation's traditional culture? Many people have difficulty imagining a successful combination of the two aspects. However, in the 21st century, many gaming companies have begun incorporating their national culture into their products. Among them, Genshin Impact's attempt is remarkable. Its animation of the Divine Damsel of Devastation, has gained virality across the world and attracted massive audiences to learn about the traditional Chinese Opera.

Genshin Impact, a video game launched in 2020 by the Chinese company Hoyoverse, portrayed seven countries in Teyvat, a fantastical land based on seven different cultures in human history. In Genshin, the protagonist is on a quest to travel across the seven countries in search of their lost twin sibling, only to discover that the secret of Teyvat is darker than they imagined. Combined with its intriguing storyline, intricate artistic designs, and delightful melodies, Genshin Impact remediates traditional Chinese culture to make it more accessible and acceptable to contemporary audiences, spreading Chinese values and beliefs to the world.

The remediation of traditional Chinese Opera in the form of a pop song exemplifies such a statement. Chinese Opera, a form of native Chinese art that has been the number one form of entertainment for Chinese people for thousands of years, has recently seen diminished interest. This is due to several reasons. With China opening up its borders to the outside world, Western influence has attracted many, especially younger generations, to new forms of entertainment. The desire to catch up with global trends further amplifies the need to turn to the West. Traditional Chinese Opera was well known for its slow, soft and dragged pronunciations that deliberately blur Chinese characters to the human ear. In the olden days, this technique was successful in leaving its audiences with room to imagine, making Chinese Opera enigmatic and attractive. However, as the pace of daily life gets faster, popular culture desires short and fast-paced music that contains a sudden outburst of energy, which is incompatible with Chinese Opera. Younger audiences do not have the patience to sit through an entire performance anymore, and they consider it idleness, a luxury that they cannot afford. Second, as a form of public art, ancient Chinese Opera aims to promote traditional Chinese values such as loyalty to the sovereign and the patriarch in the family. Younger Chinese people neither understand nor agree with such values. As a result, fewer people turn to Chinese Opera for entertainment.

In 2022, during the Chinese Spring Festival, Yun Jin, a new character inspired by Chinese opera performances, makes her way to the Genshin stage and is ready to share The Divine Damsel of Devastation with worldwide players. As a public art that takes place in an electronic medium, the Divine Damsel of Devastation serves as a form of story retelling.

The increased bondage to playable characters continuously draws players back to the game, despite knowing the difference between fiction and reality. Meanwhile, the combination of visuals and acoustics amplifies the empathy between players and the fictional character, as they witness 'the damsel' experiencing betrayal, loneliness and hardship, but eventually gaining true friendship and bravery, becoming the 'divine damsel' she deserves to be.

On the other hand, "Devastation and Redemption", the piece of music that serves as a main channel of storytelling, integrates pop music with elements of Chinese Opera, including the language and music style, to fit into Yun Jin's identity as an Opera performer. And it proved to be a huge success: younger people began to realize the beauty of this traditional art and it has created an Opera craze within the Chinese internet community. They strove to study the Opera not only as a new talent for themselves but also to revive the art and industry. Not only Chinese players, but also overseas players began to appreciate the beauty of Chinese Opera. For instance, since the beginning of 2022, the Peking Opera video on the CGTN channel has reached a staggering 843 000 views. In the comments sections, many users began sharing their knowledge of/experiences listening to Chinese Opera with elders. The younger generations witnessed a large increase in audiences for Chinese Opera.

However, what is most striking is that the success has encouraged traditional artists to rethink the methods used to pass down traditional culture. Naturally, success comes with dissent: some have criticized the animation for being neither fish nor fowl, saying that it is vital to preserve the rules of ancient arts. Nevertheless, the mainstream view argues that traditional arts should not be preserved within an altar, but made more accessible by merging them into contemporary life and keeping them in pace with modern tastes and values. Society is constantly changing, they argue, and so is art. Strictly sticking to the past rules without regarding the present will not advance art to the next level. Since the success of the *Divine Damsel of Devastation*, people have increasingly realized the endless potential of combining Chinese traditions with present values and technology and initiated an increasing amount of similar projects in the entertainment industry. As the 2023 Chinese New Year approaches, Hoyoverse has officially launched its new documentary series, "A Journey of Art and Heritage", collaborating with inheritors of intangible cultural heritage, such as woodblock prints and inside painting, to recreate ales of Liyue— the country that represents Ancient China in the game—into real life.
 As William Faulkner once said: "The past is never dead. It's not even past". The same logic applies to historical traditions and heritages. Although the predominant media changes, spirit, values, and beliefs remain the roots of our society. They not only become a part of our identity— both as individuals and as a whole—but also pave the way for our future.

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AGATA MOCIANI

The Illusions of That Girl

Routine and Lifestyle TikToks Have Been Amplifying Young Women's Fear of Missing Out in the Aftermath of the Pandemic

The fear of missing out (often abbreviated as FOMO) has been a common concern for as long as social media has existed. As a concept, it used to be primarily associated with anxiety surrounding exclusion from social events. However, the prevalence of 'healthy living' content on social media during and after lockdown has revealed that the feeling of wasting one's youth instead of embodying one's best self can extend to private, single-person activities as well. The emergence of TikTok as the pandemic's most popular app has complicated and exacerbated the effects of this phenomenon. The social media platform's tendency to induce non-social FOMO in viewers can be exemplified through its ever-present wellness trends that target individuals' personal lives and habits.

For around two years, highly romanticized, meticulously curated daily routines and 'digital diary' videos have saturated the video-sharing app. Though FOMO impacts people of all genders, the version that stems from aesthetic lifestyle TikToks primarily affects young women and teenage girls who crave to adopt the seemingly effortless yet productive routines shown by the algorithm. These TikToks are meant to demonstrate that even in tumultuous, unprecedented times, women can appreciate life and participate in creative and productive activities. Unfortunately, they tend to come across as a show of toxic positivity.

TikTok lifestyle vloggers usually seem unaware that what they perceive as a period of 'self-improvement' has been a time of instability and trauma for others. Sure, TikTokers are capable of inspiring viewers and sharing healthy coping mechanisms. However, the quarantine routine and pandemic productivity videos that permeated TikTok between 2020 and late 2021 signalled a lack of social awareness.

One such example is TikTok's "That Girl" trend, which shows the daily regimens of young women with disposable incomes who could focus solely on their 'daily grind' and self-care (@mervozkn, 2023.). According to a recent CBC article, the problem with the trend is that "young women are no longer just sharing their personal routines but instead aspiring to an idealized version of what a perfect woman does" (Singer, 2021). Any woman who does not have ample leisure time, unlimited funds, and expensive skincare is likely to feel excluded. FOMO is complicated for viewers to avoid since the trend presents itself as a key to achieving success and personal fulfillment as a young woman. "That Girl" began to gain traction during the summer of 2021, but it is still frequently recycled under various labels. More recently, it has shifted to fit into the post-COVID landscape, manifesting itself as a desire to 'catch up' after missing out on life during the pandemic. Lately, women online have been pressured to overcompensate for lost time through self-care, social interaction, and excessive materialistic consumerism.

Each time a new version of "That Girl" surfaces, the concept is met with admiration from women who want to embody it and criticism from those who recognize it for what it is: an unattainable, capitalistic trend. In a short article about the subject, Nadia Trudel states, "'That Girl' does not go to therapy or need medication, she takes a bubble bath, puts on a face mask, watches only one episode of Friends, bakes... This self-care trend encourages you to spend money on certain products and is incredibly individualistic" (Trudel, 2021). A more recent iteration of the That Girl trend is "My 5-9 before my 9-5". These viral videos revolve around the early morning routines of working women. They tend to show creators waking up around 5 am, working out, journalling, cooking for themselves, and beginning to plan their day before work begins at 9 am. While the choice to wake up early has always worked for some people, its virality has led to young women viewing the concept through rose-tinted lenses.

One reason that TikTok has amplified young women's FOMO is because of the very nature and formatting of the app. Unlike photo-sharing sites like Pinterest or Instagram, TikTok is not a medium that presents users with frozen, static fragments of people's desirable lifestyles. Before TikTok gained traction, the pervasive fear of missing out was most often attributed to carefully curated photos. People often soothed each other's FOMO by reminding one other that content creators only post staged images that aren't reflective of their whole lives. It is far more challenging to find reassurance in such a statement while watching a TikTok of someone's seemingly 'perfect' daily routine.

In an article for The New Yorker, Kyle Chayka pinpoints the difference between the aesthetic effects of TikTok and photo-sharing platforms like Instagram. He writes: "Whereas Instagram's main form is the composed tableau, captured in a single still image or unedited video, TikTok's is the collection of real-world observations, strung together in a filmic montage" (Chayka, 2021). TikTok lifestyle vlogs allow audiences to immerse themselves in the content in a way that feels more engaging than simply gazing at a photo. Even if they are not genuine representations of a person's life, aesthetically appealing TikToks often feel more authentic and natural to young viewers, which can amplify the feeling of FOMO.

Chayka goes on to say that "Vibes were made for the Internet not just because they're audiovisual but because... they are participatory. Anyone can assemble her own version" (2021). While, ideally, this should be true, the "vibes" or aesthetics seen in stylish lifestyle TikToks are not always attainable.

Replicating the circumstances seen in these deceivingly simple videos usually requires a certain level of affluence and class privilege. Additionally, social media discrimination prevents the emergence of more diverse, realistic lifestyle creators.

According to Melanie Kennedy's article about the ties between girlhood, TikTok, and the Coronavirus, not every young woman on TikTok is presented with an equal opportunity to share content. She explains that, in 2020, a publication leaked internal records from the creators of TikTok. These documents "instructed [the app's] moderators to algorithmically suppress posts by users deemed to appear 'abnormal' or 'ugly' (indicating factors including wrinkles and obesity)" (2020). Kennedy clarifies that "With popularity on TikTok determined by algorithms... such suppression and censorship work to make invisible those subjects judged not to fit the ideals of young white femininity". This is an example of the app's deliberately discriminatory bias. Since beauty standards uphold white supremacy and hetero/cisnormative gender roles, TikTok mainly provides a platform for conventionally attractive, white, thin cishet women and girls while silencing anyone who does not fit into these narrow categories.

Kennedy's article also dissects the calculated relatability conveyed by privileged female creators to their audiences. This relatability adds to influencers' appeal; after all, it makes their lifestyles seem attainable while portraying their personalities as down-to-earth. Relatability is something creators need more than ever now that viewers are more conscious of differences in privilege. In an article for the 22nd Annual Conference of Internet Researchers, Alkım Yalın examines how female vloggers have maintained this delicate balance of relatability with their audience during the pandemic. She writes that "some content creators can choose to frame their decision to film a quarantine vlog as a way to provide a distraction for their viewers or to 'check in' with them" (Yalin, 2021). Though the vlogger remains the centre of attention, this approach blurs the line of the parasocial creator/audience relationship and makes viewers feel cared for.

In conclusion, lifestyle profiles on TikTok present self-care, food preparation, physical activity, and hobbies through a highly unrealistic, overly aestheticized lens. They promote a warped perception of what it means to correctly exist as a young woman or teenage girl in a late-stage capitalist world that promotes constant toxic productivity. During the first lockdown in 2020, I predicted that FOMO would affect members of my generation because we would be deprived of interpersonal interactions and cultural milestones. Parties, group gatherings, university graduations, and high school prom became inaccessible; none of these social activities took place for over a year. Now, I recognize that the concept of FOMO is no longer as simple as it was before COVID-19; nor can it only be attributed to interpersonal situations.

TikTok created unattainable expectations for every aspect of people's personal lives both during and after a global pandemic. When quarantine made everyone feel as though they were missing out on important milestones, it was easy to feel that we were not reaching our full potential. We did not (and still do not) need influencers to exacerbate that by creating lifestyle standards for us to abide by in order to feel confident and fulfilled. "That Girl" and similar trends create more stress for people who already feel pressured to perform femininity in a way that conforms to rigid societal gender roles.

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TABAN ISFAHANINEJAD

The Changing Ecosystems of Media Virality:

A Media Ecology Perspective

According to Casey Man Kong Lum, media ecology is "the study of the symbiotic relationship between people and the media technologies they create and use" (Lum 137). Media ecology considers systems of communications not as neutral, but as carrying inherent assumptions and messages that shape us and the way we shape them, as well as the way they are used (Lum 136). From a media ecology perspective, we are "inside" the medium, and it is inside of us (Lum 142).

Let's look at one way we might analyze TikTok using this framework. TikTok's content is incredibly diverse, and what you see on your For You page is entirely dependent on who you are (Venn). The TikTok algorithm relies primarily on keeping you watching: the longer you spend on a video, the more likely you are to see more like it (Venn). Conversely, if you're a creator on the app, the longer people spend watching you, the more money or fame you get (Venn).

The underlying message of this medium is that attention = growth, attention = success, and attention = value. This isn't unique to TikTok, though it's by far the worst offender. Apps such as Instagram and Facebook and even YouTube have been heavily pushing short-form video and retention rates on their sites, because for them, the longer you watch, the more opportunity they have to show you advertisements- and the more money they make (Bateman). But it's not just that- Instagram, Twitter and the parent company of YouTube are public companies with investors and shareholders (Investopedia), meaning one of their primary concerns from a business perspective is maintaining growth. Baked into three of the biggest social media platforms in the world is the underlying assumption that growth of user base and interaction should be a high priority. Under this assumption, the value of a media or medium is directly related to how many people are watching it.

One way you can see the message of this medium reflected across user bases is in the
fetishization of "awareness," as a socially conscious, positive form of virality. From Instagram infographics to mental health "awareness," and the pressure put on celebrities to speak on political issues they know nothing about, the message we're constantly bombarded with is SPEAK! SPEAK! SPEAK! even if you have nothing to say. Awareness and attention- i.e., virality- are the main currencies, perhaps even more so than actual action. Whether it's true or not that spreading awareness of global issues is the first step to solving them, I think it's important to ask: why do we think it's so important? What can we deduce from this premium we've started to place on virality? And is there actually as strong a correlation as we seem to think there is between virality, or awareness, and action?

Operating under the assumption that attention/virality as success is both an internal philosophy and material truth for platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, we can see the relation between attention/virality, profitability, and success in a series of three steps as below:

1. Attention/virality = profitability. The longer people spend on the platform, the more ads they consume; the more ads people consume, the more effective the platform is as an advertiser; the more effective the platform is as an advertiser, the more companies are willing to give the platform money. Thus, the longer people spend on the platform, the more money the platform makes.

2. Profitability = success. Because the platform succeeds when the content on it gets people to spend a long time on the platform, the platform's format and algorithm starts to prioritize content that keeps people watching. Creators who make longer videos, or videos that are more advertiser-friendly, for example, are given preferential treatment by the algorithm. Creators who make content that is financially successful for the platform get literal success in return.

3. Therefore, attention/virality = success. The above accomplishes two things. First, it incentivizes and funds creators to make content that, above all, keeps people watching. Second, it de-incentivizes and defunds content that doesn't have virality as its primary goal.

At first glance, this might seem fair to some people. If Creator A's videos are more fun to watch, won't people spend more time watching them? Won't they become more "viral," and shouldn't Creator A therefore deserve to be prioritized by the platform for their great work? But quality and enjoyment aren't actually factors here. Though these platforms push the idea that the longer something keeps people watching, that the more viral it manages to be, the better it is, that's not necessarily true. It takes more of an attention span to watch The Godfather, for example, than it does to watch a TikTok that's a split frame of Trisha Paytas crying with over-saturated Subway Surfers gameplay below it, but that doesn't make the former better. It just makes it more profitable. It just makes it more viral, and despite what our digital landscape might currently be assuming, those three are not necessarily equivalent.

You might be thinking that the idea of achieving success by popularity or "virality" isn't new, and that TikTok is just the latest example of celebrity culture. While you wouldn't be totally wrong, I would argue that the TikTok model can't be explained away that easily.

The TikTok model doesn't just reward popularity with success; it also redefines success and popularity. It doesn't matter how much you like what you're watching as long as you keep watching. The reason TikTok isn't comparable to old-school outrage marketing is because TikTok isn't getting you hooked on toxic content so you'll buy something out of curiosity as to whether it can really be that bad. TikTok's getting you hooked just so it can keep you hooked. TikTok as a platform is essentially just an advertising service with some extra perks. You can't compare seeing ads on TikTok to seeing ads on old-school TV intercut with episodes of Downton Abbey or Breaking Bad, for example, because with those shows the money from the advertisements goes back into funding new productions, new screenwriters and actors and scores. The television network, in those cases, uses your money or your consumption of their ads to produce its own original content. But overwhelmingly, and especially in TikTok's case, that's not happening. TikTok takes your money/data in exchange for content that its users contribute for free. Sure, you can make money on TikTok, but that isn't overhead money that TikTok invests into what you're making, it's just a share of the profits TikTok makes off volunteer labor.

The form of the content we interact with online is overwhelmingly short, digestible snippets that reach as wide an audience as possible. Everything in the texture of our digital landscape encourages us to value those three characteristics. And the content that we produce in turn reflects this. Looking at the rise of TikTok- not only as a platform, but as a business model, and as a way of formatting social media- from a media ecology perspective, we can see that our relationship with virality online is developing into something entirely different- a new state of being in which a higher premium on ever is placed on getting attention and going viral.

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SARAH KLAMCZYK

Winter Morning

You wake up, and find there are a million different versions of yourself staring back at you; that a mirror has shattered in the middle of the night and in each tiny fragment you see the smallest fraction of who you really are. Each reflection is yourself, and not yourself. In vain, you try to put the pieces together, but they elude your attempts at organization, slipping through your fingers like mercury.

Haha, this is so me!
Um, I can't believe you would post this...

Tagging all my mutuals!

You go about your daily routine. You cannot help but step on the shards of broken glass, every movement grinding their sharp edges deeper into your body. You fear they will enter your bloodstream, that you will not be able to tell where you end and everyone else begins. Already, you cannot quite tell all the pieces apart. They are nobody, each of these shattered others, and they are you. You see yourself in them because you cannot imagine an icon online as a real person. To even attempt that would drive you insane, would tear your heart to pieces more than their comments have already.

Hey, out of curiosity, who did you vote for last election? Want to make sure I'm not following anyone weird.

Thought this was funny.

PSA! OP has a history of following canceled celebrities. Repost so people are aware!

You drag yourself, limping, to the bathroom mirror. You do not recognize the person you see.You are famous now. Your friends would kill to be you. You are a face on the internet. You are everyone's and no one. You have gone viral.

You do not know when this is going to end. You dream, fruitlessly, of being the person you were last night. You'd looked out the window at the snow, warm mug in hand, and smiled. You'd reached for your phone, innocent and still able to dream of the myth of popularity.

"Cold night tonight!" You post. "I sure am glad to be warm and cozy inside."

CARLY JAZBEC

Resonance of Viral Influence

Interacting powers behind devices' glow, A
single post echoes across the globe.
An image, video, or catchy phrase—
Endless possibilities seize the viral daze.

Weaving webs with virtual threads,
On and off-screen, realities blend.
Crossing oceans with every trend,
Life through the internet we extend.

Artificial constructs, interconnected,
Linking ingrained values by which we're
directed. The web resounds our words and
deeds, Ripple effects propagate mind
seeds.

A poison arrow, unbridled and free,
Bow drawn, aimed for all to see.
But actions aligned with a greater goal,
Reclaims wisdom of the forgotten whole.

  Embodied values and behaviours guide,
Towards sustainable systems, we stride.
Regenerating value, not material gain,
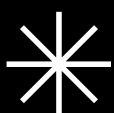Nature's ecosystem is our priceless domain.

Art is a gift, a service to the masses,
A reflection of ourselves, our culture, our
fashions. With far-reaching impact, it breeds
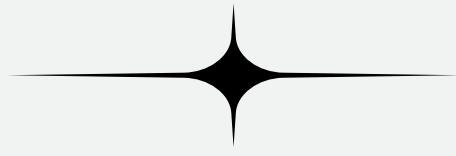insight, Feeding all hearts with wisdom's
light.

Virality transcends the virtual, you see, A
force for change, both you and me.

IV. Contributors

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