"HEARTWARMING MOMENT OF THE DAY": GLOBAL SHARING OF VIRAL CONTENT ON FACEBOOK

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Do you remember the earlier days of Facebook, when a group dedicated to a man, who wanted to collect 1 million likes so he could convert his house into a pirateship with the blessing of his girlfriend, went viral? And the girlfriend ended up having to (principally) yield to his wish because of the massive number of likes he got? This is one example of what one might term global "banal" content, that is viral content which cannot be described as breaking or political news in any way, but nevertheless include elements which for a fleeting moment encourages users to share it globally. This research project, the framework of which this paper seeks to describe, aims at understanding more closely Facebook user engagement with this form of shared content. The "viral content" which I will examine is closely related to the principles of"virality", defined by Hahon and Hemsley as an "information flow process" during which many people spread the same item of information over a short period of time and beyond their own personal networks (Nahon and Hemsley 2013: 16). This "piece of information" is often a meme, an infectious and attractive cultural "idea" in the very broad sense. During the viral spread of the meme, it can be either copied without intervention or "repackaged" and altered by its sharers (cf. Shifman 2014). I understand the "pieces of information" analysed in this project as memes, vis a vis their apparently infectious (viral) nature, even if they are passed forward without alterations. Constine (2009) refers to this type of meme as as "discrete" memes, whereas the template meme type can be described as "symbiotic". The memes in question will henceforth be referred to as discrete mundane memes.

The research project, currently in its first phase, explores seven discrete mundane memes, which have attracted massive attention from Facebook users across national borders. It seeks to explore and draw to the fore some of the reasons why some pieces of content might attract attention on a global scale on Facebook, in particular by studying how the memes are commented on by an international mass of Facebook users. Currently, few if any studies exist which adresses this particular phenomena from a combined content and reception perspective, applying both qualitative and quantitative measures. However researchers have discussed which content and which mechanicsm support the spreading of memes and viral content on social media on a more general level (see f.i. Bakshy et al 2012, Nahon and Hemsley 2013, Shifman 2014). They posit that personal relation to the (previous) sharer, novelty, emotional ressonance, quality and "packaging" of content, humour and the uptake by "interest

networks" are some of the main contributing factors to a meme's success. Additionally, a small body of researchers and market research companies have explored more generally why people share content on social network sites. Of particular interest to this research is a study by market research company Ipsos which have surveyed 12,420 global online "sharers" in 24 countries. Their study revealed that on average across countries, people prefer to share "interesting" (61%), "important" (43%) and "funny" (43%) things. However, four in ten (37%) i indicated they share 'to let others know what I believe in and who I really am" (Ipsos 2013). Baek et al (2011) studied reasons for sharing links on Facebook, and found that the three dominat motives for sharing was the wish to share information (21%), convenience and entertainment (18%), and to pass time (13,1%). From a psychological perspective, sharing as an act can be understood as grounded both in intrinsic motivations (enjoyment and commitment to the community) and extrinsic motivations (self- development and reputation gaining) (see Nov et al 2010). Sharing on social media sites thus serves both the function of providing (continued) grounds for social interaction and as a means of self-promotion and entertainment, and the project will seek to explore whether these motivations can also be identified in the comments to the seven memes. Finally, of additional interest is also a growing body of literature examining diffusion patterns and large-scale propagation of content on social network sites, based on mathematical and statistical analysis of spreading patterns (see for instance Bashy et al 2012, Goel et al 2012, Dow et al 2013). Through an analysis of posting dates and times and the nationality of posters, this project will seek to identify possible patterns of propagation, both temporally and nationally.

Research Case

The popular examples described and analysed in the final paper consists of seven examples of viral content pieces which made their way to the author's personal news feed in the period between January 2013 and January 2014. The main selection criteria has been that the content should have attracted at least 200.000 likes, comments or shares and that this user-generated content in relation to the identifiable original post should originate from several different countries. Systemically discovering and tracking the "most popular" content is in itself a methodological challenge due to Facebooks search restrictions which is the reason why for this project content has simply been identified on grounds of it having entered the author's own national network. In the final paper, I will present results based on the crawling, and quantitative and qualitative analysis of all comments made to the selected seven memes. *

Table 1. Overview of seven globally popular discrete memes

	Content	Posted	Most recent com	Likes (feb 2014)	Comments (feb 2014)	Shares (feb 2014)	Source
1	Photocollage, wedding anniversary	Feb 7th 2013	Feb 2014	6.484.915	137.262	208.297	Radio station J104.5
2	Video of dog "playing" piano while howling	Nov 17th 2012	Jan 2013	108.816	38.224	365.442	"Share it" page
3	Private photo of boy died in the Boston terror attack. Thanks from the father.	April 16th 2013	May 2013	603,994	83.552	119.627	ABC NEWS
4	"Banned tv advert", Australian video wordplay on dick/deck.	Oct 13th 2013	Feb 2014	127.283	53.506	280.339	Sam Jones (college kid)
5	Photo/text joke: old man pretends divorce to have chidren home f xmas	Dec 18th 2013 (removed)	?	1.410.351 * dec 2013	97.448 * dec 2013	344.729 * dec2013	Radio station HotZ95
6	Video: worldfamous violinist goes unnoticed on tube station	Jan 26th 2013	Feb 2014	966.841	52.555	910.116	Liberty Girl page, public figure, US
7	Comic (one pic) "Have you seen Jesus" – hides behind curtain	Feb 11th 2012	Feb 2014	636.456	44.515	445.083	George Takei page, actor

First Findings

The most popular and widely distributed piece of content in the sample is a wedding anniversary photo, depicting on the left side an official wedding photo in black and white of a young couple and on the right side, a current photo of the same couple, many years aged, lovingly embracing each other. The photo text reads "Heartwarming moment of the day: He's 101, she's 97. they've been married for 80 years!! Yes, 80 years!! Click LIKE to congratulate them!!". As the table illustrates, to date this photo has received 6.484.915 likes, 137.262 comments and it has been shared 208,297 times. A pilot study (probing around 5000+ interactions made in the context of the photo during February 2014) reveal that users who have interacted with the post have their base in more than 20 countries and on five different continents. Most comments are celebratory, either explicit "congratulations" or comments on the (wonderful) length of the marriage and the

power of love. Thus, discrete meme engagement in this case seem to be grounded in both emotional arousal, positivity and the apparent novelty of discovering that people can actually stay married this long. People use the comments both to express intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for interacting with the content, such as "I hope to be them , reminiscing on the marriage of their own parents, or pointing to them as "true role models" to modern society.

By notable comparison, the photo of President Obama embracing his wife with the text "four more years" which appeared on his page after he won the 2012 elections - by some sources declared the most popular photo on Facebook ever - has "only" (to this date) gotten 4,436,997 likes (but roughly twice the shares of the anniversary photo). Dow et al (2013) demonstrated that the cascades (spreading events) following the posting of the above mentioned Obama photo and the spreading of a call for likes in order for an ordinary guy to have sex with his girlfriend developed in very different ways. In the Obama photo case (the celebrity), data revealed that 50% of those that reshared the photo also followed his page. In the "like this for sex" case, the spreading pattern was more organic and deeper. It is worth noting, that the wedding anniversary meme and five of the other memes do not have a seeding sender (first poster) with any international celebrity status in and of itself. (one meme is posted by the somewhat popular actor George Takei, however the content is not related to him personally in any way). Furthermore, to this day people still like and comment on four of the seven memes. This indicates that even if sharing has slowed down, it continues to reach new networks. Further mining of the data gathered from the seven cases will hopefully reveal whether this and other initial observations put forth in this first version of the paper holds true.

* The development of the crawler has meet unexpected problems and contrary to plan, the full data set was not yet available at the time of submission.