An Overview of Viral Video

For the purpose of this discussion, let’s define viral videos as those that meet several basic criteria:

1. Viral videos receive a large number of views, usually in a relatively short period of time.

This can be assessed by considering two primary factors—the date a video was uploaded and the number of viewings the video has had. On sites like YouTube and Vimeo, both pieces of information can usually be found on the same page where a user would play the video. On other sites, such as Google Video, only an approximate date of posting is listed, with no statistical data provided. From studying sites that do list data, it seems that most viral videos (such as those listed in *Time*’s “YouTube’s 50 Best Videos”) have received several million views at minimum, though videos that receive a high number of hits in a short period (e.g., tens or hundreds of thousands in one week), may also indicate that a video has become a viral video. Another useful method for tracking a video’s viral quality is offered by the Web site Mememachine, which tracks how often videos are shared by accumulating data from Facebook, Twitter, Blogger, and user comments on video-hosting sites.

As of this writing, that video has been viewed almost 12 million times on YouTube, and it has spawned numerous parody clips (including one aired on Comedy Central’s *Talk.0* featuring Kato Kaelin in the role of the cat), been featured on clothing and merchandise, and become a symbol for a phenomenon known as “viral video.” Like Christine O’Donnell’s “I am not a Witch” video mentioned in chapter 2, the keyboard cat video struck a nerve with online audiences in such a way as to cause the video to attain a meteoric rise in popularity, garnering many hits in a short period of time.

This chapter investigates these videos in order to shed light on what makes them connect with audiences as they do by providing an overview of viral video, explaining a case study, and offering discussion on how to understand their significance in the broader purview of digital rhetoric.

2. Viral videos generate a significant number of responses.

Statistically, this measure is a little bit harder to assess, but it is probably more significant for the rhetorical critic interested in studying viral video. What separates a viral video from other popular videos isn’t simply the number of views but also the ways in which the video is taken up in both traditional and new media outlets. Viral videos often generate a significant amount of blog postings, response and parody videos, and re-airings on television news and comedy programs. For example, C-SPAN’s YouTube video of Barack Obama’s 2008 inauguration speech has garnered more than 4 million hits, but the video itself hasn’t spawned near the amount of par-
odies, blog posts, and activity on social media–sharing sites as did the video “Hamster on a Piano (Eating Popcorn)” from the same year, even though the hamster video had fewer total views than the inauguration. A search on YouTube for “Hamster on a Piano” yields more than 400 videos that are repostings, homage, parodies, remixes, or other engagements with the original video. “Hamster on a Piano (Eating Popcorn)” has a Web site affiliated with the video where users can watch videos of hamsters eating popcorn in other locations, buy t-shirts and merchandise with the title of the video, and become Facebook friends with those involved with the video. In addition, “Hamster on a Piano (Eating Popcorn)” made Time Magazine's list of Best Viral Videos of 2008, has been made into ringtone for cell phones, was discussed briefly and aired on MSNBC's Rachel Maddow Show, and covered in many blog postings across the Web. Even several years after the video was launched, one can still find “Hamster” t-shirts and merchandise for sale across the Web.

3. Viral videos rely heavily on pathos and novelty.

“Hamster on a Piano (Eating Popcorn)” is similar to another popular viral video produced by user ParryGripp featuring a musical montage of hamsters, mice, rabbits, and other small creatures eating food titled “Nom Nom Nom Nom Nom Nom.” This video, which has received more than 11 million hits in two years, is primarily remarkable for how “cute” the animals are and how apropos the music accompanying the video (with a refrain of “nom nom nom”) is, given the subject matter. The fact that both videos have attained “viral” status is not a coincidence. A quick survey of any list of “greatest viral videos of all time” reveals that most rely on strong pathos elements such as humor and music, are relatively short (one to two minutes in length is common, almost all are under five minutes), and tend to each be different from other videos that have gone viral previously. In other words, though some successful viral videos utilize tried and true tropes of whatever respective genre applies in order to generate favorable emotional responses by audiences, the majority find resonance through the use of novelty. It is this novelty that plays an important role in facilitating peer-to-peer sharing and other forms of circulation across the Web.

Viral Video and Rhetorical Theory

While these three basic criteria (popularity, response, and novelty) help us understand what marks viral videos as distinct from other videos found on the Web, it is worth remembering that a YouTube video that has received 100 million views is just as enabled and constrained by the medium in which it appears as a video that has received one viewing. That is, if we put aside context and uptake, studying video on the Web shares much in common with studying video anywhere else we might find it. The wealth of existing scholarship on visual rhetoric (specifically the rhetoric of film) is quite useful when approaching videos to assess their aesthetic or narrative qualities, and though many Web videos are user-created or “amateur” video, that does not mean that they are somehow unique to new media.

Some interesting scholarship specific to online video has already been done by rhetorical scholars, much of it indicating how some of the technological characteristics of new media might promote a different understanding of the significance of concepts like interaction and circulation. For example, Kephart and Rafferty’s analysis of the “Yes We Can” campaign in the 2008 election and the resulting Will.i.am video on YouTube (which garnered widespread attention during the campaign and is an example of a political viral video) posited that the video functioned to perpetuate the “central trope” in the 2008 campaign:

The ‘Yes We Can’ video is both intertextual and hyper-textual. The trope travels rhizomatically from audience to news channel to Internet and back into itself on television, in classrooms, on social networking sites, and in every site imaginable. (17)

The concept of “rhizomatic travel” is a reference to work by Guy Deleuze and Felix Guattari that suggests that discourses of change travel or circulate much like a rhizome in nature—horizontally, with many points of connection and departure. Kephart and Rafferty explained that “a rhizomatic understanding of rhetoric is a useful lens” because it is well suited for the analysis of “rhetorical tropes in the context of a hyper-mediated political campaign” (7) and that the video proved to be a device that “establishes consubstantiality” (15) between various audiences and Obama.

The idea that viral videos might best be understood as video rhizomes is also the central thesis in Wolfe’s essay on the viral video series The Matrix, a collection of shorts that parody the Matrix films by using animated barnyard animals to warn about the dangers of factory farming. Arguing that the viral metaphor is flawed by “mechanistic thinking” (319), Wolfe suggests that the rhizome better captures the logic of activist videos that garner large followings. He explains:

The so-called viral video is neither self-reproducing nor autonomous. The spread of both biological and computer viruses are involuntary to the host. New media texts, however, spread not as an infection but through deliberate activity... Put simply, audience members are not at the whim of an autonomous infection, but, conversely, make individual choices regarding dissemination. (320)
In some comments that mirror chapter 2’s discussion of critical disagreement over technological determinism, Wolfe even ventures that a “viral” view of video is deterministic, whereas a rhizomatic view emphasizes the relational, human component of these videos:

In contrast to the mechanistic view of technological determinism, with predatory viral videos autonomously self-reproducing from an infected host, a relational view allows for understanding rhetorical function alongside technological characteristics. The Maitrise viewed as an assemblage focuses our attention on the connection between the text as a situated argument, its context as an emergent technological form, and the way it is experienced by viewers. (321)

Instead of offering a critique that focuses on the content of the video itself, Wolfe uses rhetorical criticism as a tool to trace the “lines” of relationships between instantiations of the video, responses to the video, and other aspects of a video’s circulation.

This emphasis on uptake, shared by both Kephart and Rafferty and Wolfe, is reflective of the kind of rhetorical situation described by Barbara Biesecker (1989), one that emphasizes the contingent and subjective nature of discursive events. To study uptake is to move from studying the features and nuances of discourse as it occurs in an event to studying the effects and uses of that discourse in new contexts. Studying videos from the perspective of uptake is not an attempt to measure “effect” from the perspective of “intent” (e.g., if a video succeeded or failed), but from the perspective of citation. The critic asks: What is the continued usage of a discourse? What is its “citational legacy”?5

This perspective on how to apply rhetorical theory to the study of new media is one that is indebted to postmodern deconstructionist philosophy, and it is well suited to viral video for a number of reasons. For one, as Roderick Hart explains, from a deconstructionist point of view “all messages are interwoven” (317), and thus “we cannot escape intertextuality...subtexts affect not only how we listen and read but also how we are prepared to listen and read” (318). As is often the case with viral video, this intertextuality is either explicit in the video itself or can be found in comments and other text accompanying the video’s circulation. That is, the videos may combine video and sound in novel ways, make allusions to other video (in parody, for example), or be contextualized by e-mails, blog posts, or comments surrounding the video frame. The analysis of viral video, then, is not simply a study of the video in and of itself but of everything surrounding it. It is this surrounding discursive context which gives evidence of a video’s viral status. Aaron Hess points to the potential significance of the surrounding discourse of online videos when he writes of YouTube members who “utilize parody and the edge of irony as a strategy of resis-

tance that unpacks original messages through an intertextual negotiation of the original and the parodic” (481). Hess is referencing online activity surrounding a set of government-produced antidrug ads on YouTube; he eventually concludes that the majority of the accompanying comments, reply videos, and other surrounding discourse does much to undermine the potential of video sites to act as place of political deliberation. In the next section we will look at an example of viral video that did have political influence and that reveals some of the potential for the medium.

Case Study: Lady Gaga’s “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” Campaign

Pop singer Lady Gaga had the top-selling album in the world in 2010, moving over 6 million copies of her Fame Monster. The album’s title aptly describes her success during the year, as she was a frequent guest on talk shows and award shows, released multiple hit singles and music videos, and was nominated for consideration as one of Time Magazine’s people of the year. As Time’s Web site explained:

If you like dance and pop, the music is great—well-produced and delightfully contragious. But the spectacle that is Lady Gaga is not really about the music, even though she did win two Grammys this year. It’s not even about the outfits, including the crazy glam-rock bodices and odd headgear. Rather, Stefani Joanne Germanotta has become famous by being obsessed with fame...It’s performance art, and at least for now, everyone is loving the performance. (“Full List—Who Will Be TIME’s 2010 Person of the Year?”)

Gaga’s fame has certainly extended to the Web, as Google ranked her in the top 10 rising searches internationally in 2010 (for the categories of both “Entertainment” and “People”). It is no surprise, then, that Lady Gaga’s online music videos have also been successful. As of January 2011, Lady Gaga’s official YouTube channel boasts several videos with hundreds of millions of views (“Bad Romance” is the leader, with more than 300 million views). Especially interesting, though, is that of her videos first uploaded in 2010, the one with the most views is not a music video but a video titled “A Message from Lady Gaga to the Senate.”

The message is a plea from Lady Gaga to the Senate to repeal the Don’t Ask Don’t Tell law that made it illegal for gay service members to serve openly. In the black and white video, Lady Gaga appears in a suit and tie in front of an American flag and begins by addressing “fellow Americans” and several senators who have either proposed the Don’t Ask Don’t Tell (DADT) repeal or who are on record for having spoken against the legislation. In the video, she says:
In the last several minutes of the video Lady Gaga places calls to New York senators Chuck Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand, modeling the actions she wants the people watching the video to take (she doesn’t get through to either directly though she leaves a message). The video is just a single continuous shot, without music or any other hints as to why Lady Gaga is a popular figure.

This video meets the requirements set out above for defining viral video. First, it received a large number of views in a relatively short period of time (more than 1.5 million in the first week) (Baumann and Corn). The black and white video was posted around the same time that another clip of Lady Gaga speaking at a rally in Maine about DADT was garnering attention on the Web; collectively the videos were viewed on YouTube more than 3 million times in 2010 and were subsequently picked up by other video-hosting sites. A quick survey of the Web in January 2011 shows that there are videos of Lady Gaga speaking about Don’t Ask Don’t Tell on video hosts vimeo.com, go.com, vodpod.com, meededia.com, blip.tv, metacafe.com, veoh.com, and elsewhere. Some of these hosted the video directed to the Senate, others featured the Maine rally, and still others hosted various media interviews Lady Gaga did with Larry King and others regarding the topic. Collectively, these videos suggest that Lady Gaga’s presence on the Web as an advocate for a repeal of DADT from September 2010 on was pervasive.

Second, the video garnered the attention of other media outlets and spawned many reply videos by other YouTube users. Snippets of the video played widely on mainstream television news stations, Gaga’s plea and some related Twitter activity between the singer and Harry Reid garnered reports and editorials from newspapers and online news sources, and at least one outlet even followed up on the story with the Pentagon (Lawrence). As Huffington Post editorialist Lynn Parramore put it,

While members of Congress were suffering historical amnesia, pop singer Lady Gaga—dubbed a “sexual radical” by antigay activists—released a video urging senators and fellow Americans to push for repeal...Sen. Lindsey Graham (R, S.C.) heard it, but expressed his disdain: “Whether Lady Gaga likes it or not is not of great concern to me” because she’s not in the military. The Senator’s understanding of the issue of closeted gays in the armed forces aside, he is, undeniably, a politician. And that, alas, would be the American group last to get it on Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.
repeal of DADT, it served a small role in gaining further public attention for a controversial legislative vote. On the other hand, it is also fair to say that, like other popular videos that address politics in some fashion (William’s “We are the Ones,” Obama’s Inauguration Speech, etc.), the total viewership is significantly less than those videos that feature cute hamsters, humiliating moments, or popular music. From a cynical point of view, politically relevant viral video faces an uphill battle in reaching an audience in a context that shares more commonalities with an episode of America’s Funniest Home Videos or MTV than it does with C-SPAN or political talk shows. In the next section, we’ll discuss why that might be.

Discussion: Circulation, Memes, and Viral Video

There are several ways to understand the significance of viral video itself as an important segment in a broader new media landscape. Certainly technological changes factor into the rise of viral video since the continuing, increasing success of video Web sites like YouTube corresponds to growths in broadband Internet access, to improved encoding technology for streaming video clearly and quickly, and to the proliferation of cameras in society more generally. In addition to these changes in technology, the rise of viral video simultaneously marks a certain sophistication in how users navigate and circulate hyper textual discourse and represents an important evolution in a longstanding phenomenon: the Internet meme.

If there is such a thing as a logic of digitality, then circulation is an important feature of that logic. In other words, most of the basic technologies behind new media technologies (such as binary code and data retrieval) are those that enable users to reproduce, transport, and share stored information in ways that are quicker and more reliable than older analog media forms. This emphasis on portability and exchange is expressed at the end-user level in several ways: hard drives that grow in capacity while shrinking in size, powerful handheld devices like smartphones, the copy and paste feature found in an OS, the “reply all” option found in most e-mail front ends, and so on. All of these developments not only facilitate the circulation of information across multiple texts and contexts, they promote it.

This is important for viral video for several reasons. For one, the very situatedness of viral video on the Web makes it distinct from popular media in other contexts. Viral marketing traditionally anticipated that word of mouth would drive consumer interest, and many advertisers relied on feedback from focus groups, Nielsen ratings, or sales numbers to try and gauge the effect of their commercials (much as politicians relied on poll numbers, filmmakers relied on box office numbers, etc.) Those trying to reach wide audiences with videos that featured novel, pathos-rich appeals often had limited means of ensuring viewership beyond saturating the airwaves at high costs. In addition, not only was the sharing of these videos uncommon with analog media, it also was difficult to accomplish (even dubbing an audio cassette or VHS tape could be a lengthy process and required a physical exchange). By contrast, digitality affords the possibility for users to carry out the work of distribution for those interested in propagating these messages. It also allows for built-in measures to quantitatively and qualitatively track viewership and audience responses that surpass what is available for analog media. For this reason, viral video is only possible in a digital context, it has no exact equivalent in older media.

Second, adopting a nuanced view of circulation and the technology that enables these processes is helpful for understanding how rhetoric functions online. For example, it is wise to consider how the circulation of viral video alters those traditional models of discursively constructed power dynamics as found in traditional mass media. On this point, Jean Baudrillard writes:

That discourse “circulates” is to be taken literally: that is, it no longer goes from one point to another, but it traverses a cycle that without distinction includes the positions of transmitter and receiver, now indiscernible as such. Thus there is no instance of power, no instance of transmission—power is something that circulates and whose source can no longer be located. The circulation of power, of knowledge, of discourse puts an end any localization of instances and poles. (41)

For Baudrillard, circulation in our fragmented and sped-up postmodern culture is marked just as much by its ability to displace, to dislocate, and to efface as it is by its ability to create shared experiences. This means that any political agency that might be gained through the use of viral video is especially contingent and fleeting, perhaps even more so than would be the case for agency gained through the use of other forms of media. As Baudrillard suggests, circulation in a hypermediated environment is not seizure of power, but rather a release of control. In this view, viral video is not necessarily rhizomatic or structured to survive through nodal points of connection and departure. Instead, like a virus, viral video is subject to the rules of herd mentality and to inoculation; they can persist or die off depending on the environment, the target, or the attention given to them by the (Web site) host. This is, in part, why studying a video’s uptake becomes much more important than studying its intent or content for those rhetorical critics interested in efficacy or agency.

In addition, more important than determining the best metaphor to use to describe viral videos’ circulation is the recognition that it belongs to a larger subset of Internet-based discourse known as memes. Though the term ‘‘meme’’ is usually traced to work in the 1970s by biologist Richard Dawkins and describes self-per-
petuation, the study of memes in language has its roots in the study of ancient rhetoric and is presently most often associated with repeating phrases, videos, images, and other discourse on the Internet. Internet memes can teach us much about the relationship between circulation and rhetoric in digital contexts. In some early writing about Internet memes, Garry Marshall suggests that speed, cultural pervasiveness, and an often-preposterous character are constitutive factors of this kind of discourse:

Memes can appear at much the same time in different parts of the world regardless of geographical and cultural boundaries to exert their effects. It has also been argued that the speed of transmission, and the resulting rapid cascade of memes across the Internet, makes it more difficult to distinguish between the more and less valuable memes (Taylor, 1996). There is a premium on short, catchy memes as opposed to more complex memes such as lengthy stories. Infectiousness assumes an importance far greater than that of attributes that may well have greater long-term value such as utility and authority.

Memes capture the discursive procession of ideas in vibrant, transformative fashion. As David Johnson adds, “The meme is in itself a valuable methodological tool that is particularly suited to the analysis of popular culture discourses that transform social practices in spite of their apparent superficiality and triviality,” adding “the meme is a particularly suitable tool for analyzing the political effects of cultural currents” (28–29). These currents can be traced by attending to how memetic discourse is taken up across various contexts.

Video memes are the most recent instance of a practice that has taken place on the Web almost since its inception. As “encyclopedia of all things Internet” WhatPort:80 puts it:

The meme is kind of a way that the lulu [instances of laughing] had can [sic]? be remembered in the form of OC and happiness spreads throughout the subcultures of the Internet for at least two years before it is considered old and everyone wants to forget about it. Sometimes the meme has nothing to do with lulu but everything to do with regular humour.

In addition, the site provides a timeline of how Internet memes develop, a “lifespan” of sorts. After memes originate and become popularized in their “localized” Web subculture, they begin to spread to “subcultures tolerant of the origin” where they are modified and amplified in new ways until finally attracting widespread notoriety. At the point where memes begin to become co-opted by mainstream Web sites, used in offline communication, and commercialized through “Snorg Tees and Facebook bumper stickers,” the originator of the meme gain notoriety and “the meme decays and rots” before being archived on Web culture sites. WhatPort:80’s often tongue-in-cheek explanation of memes is essentially an explanation of the hypertextual, hyperspatial character of much of Internet discourse that Baudrillard alluded to above. The life cycle of the meme teaches us something about its rhetorical significance (and thus that of viral video). That is, embedded in their humorous description of memetic circulation are insights into how memes are often co-opted, taken out of context, and slowly killed through commercialization and prolonged exposure. We saw some of this process unfold in our discussion of the responses to both the Lady Gaga and Christine O’Donnell videos, and sure enough O’Donnell’s witch meme already appears in T-shirt form on zazzle.com.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have discussed the features and functions of viral video, emphasizing how their memetic quality makes them suitable for rhetorical criticism that focuses on circulation and uptake. At this stage, viral video remains a developing form of digital discourse, and its future hinges on both further developments in Web technology and in user acclimation and response. Currently, novelty still seems to factor into any one video’s success, but it is not the only indicator of whether a video will “go viral” or what kind of impact it will make with audiences. In the next chapter we will consider these audiences in more detail by discussing the role of intertextuality in shaping meaning for Web users.

Notes

1. Also worth noting is that many of the most popular viral videos get posted multiple times on and across a variety of video-hosting Web sites, making aggregate data collecting a bit cumbersome.

2. Memelics’s methods for understanding “viral video” parallels traditional methods of assessing the success of viral marketing, a concept that predates the popularity of YouTube by almost a decade.

3. The Web site also lists such interesting statistics as a “discovered” date and buzz by language, in addition to tracking the sharing of the video over time and the top places where the video is being shared.

4. For scholarship on the rhetoric of film, see work such as Kendall Phillips’s Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture (2005), David Blakely’s The Terministic Screen: Rhetorical Perspectives on Film (2007), or David Bordwell’s Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema (1991).

5. See Judith Butler’s Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex” (1993) and Excitable
Speak: A Politics of the Performative (1997) for further discussion of the concept of a citation.

6. It is unclear whether the video is actually from someone who considers themselves to be a Klan member, as much of the video is hyperbolic and attempts to be offensive—something that marks both the actual Klan's discourse as well as responses to them.

7. Rhetorical concepts like *epitome* (repeated phrases), *ploy* (repetition with added meaning), and *paralalia* (emphatic redundancy) all address some of the rhetorical strategies associated with memes. For more, see Lanham, A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms.

8. For detailed histories of Internet memes, check out the timeline at http://www.dipity.com/s tartcakes/Internet_Memes/ and "Greg Rutter's Definitive List of the 99 Things You Should Have Already Experienced on the Internet Unless You're A Loser or Old or Something" (http://youshouldhaveseenthis.com/)

9. The use of "had can" itself refers to the meme "folcats," which are pictures of cats with accompanying sloppy grammar to mimic "cat speak."

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Intertextuality and Web-based Public Discourse

On 14 December 2010, the Huffington Post presented a parodic video recounting President Obama's many challenges during his first years in office. Comprised of an Obama look-alike (actor Ron Butler) and a large chorus celebrating "Obama's" statements, the video struck a chord with its online viewing audience ("President Obama Defends Himself"). The musical spoof took the form of a "patter song" as exemplified in the nineteenth-century comic opera by Gilbert and Sullivan, "The Pirates of Penzance," which initially debuted in New York City in 1879 (Wikipedia Foundation, *Pirates of Penzance*).

The production of the Obama video spoof serves as a masterful example of an adroit use of intertextuality as a genre because its viewers had to be thoroughly familiar with the political background and preceding chronology of political events in order to fully appreciate the video's content. They also had to have some sense of the genre from which the design of the production originated, as one blogger in the audience commented: "I guess you have to be familiar with Gilbert and Sullivan's comic opera to appreciate this hit!" This comment nicely identifies the video spoof as a "mocking imitation of someone or something, usually light and good humored" ("Spoof"), since it was transformed from comic opera to political parody by means of an actor and chorus's video production, thus becoming a modification of existing artistic material transposed from one form into another.