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Factors of Ukrainian Media Content Virality on Social Networks, under the Current Conditions

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ABSTRACT

The main **objective** of the study was to explore the key factors of the virality of media content on social networks under the current conditions in Ukraine.

To achieve the objective of the study, a combination of general and specific scientific **methods**, both theoretical and empirical, was applied. We used the methods of generalization and terminological analysis to clarify the definitions of the term "virality" and "virality content". Analytic and synthetic method allowed to single out the virality factors of the content and to get an idea of the whole system of measures applied for the promotion of information on social networks. The methods of observation and measurement were used for collecting the actual source material for the theoretical study of the virality factors. The comparison method made it possible to define the features of the information popularization under special circumstances. The method of content analysis was used for in-depth study of the text messages on social networks in order to select the indicators, which allowed interpreting the study results into the specific recommendations.

Results and Conclusions. We analyzed the concept of virality and generalized the reasons that affect the popularity of the information posted on social networks in Ukraine. The three main groups of virality factors were singled out, namely: the content (its subject and form); the audience; and the specific character of the social network. We analyzed the content of the three most popular Ukrainian media in Facebook ("Ukrayinska Pravda", "Hromadske TV", and "TSN") to define the virality factors under the current Ukrainian conditions. Given the specificity of the algorithm for ranking posts in Facebook news line, we traced the reasons for the popularity of certain materials, which are caused by the situation in the country, the emotions induced by the publication, the type of the content, and the time of the users' activity in the social network. The results of the study indicated that, given the political situation and hybrid war, there are few most popular content topics, namely: the politics, the war in eastern Ukraine and the basic life needs.

KEYWORDS: content virality; social networks; internet-media; Facebook; internet.

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Чинники віральності контенту українських медіа в соціальних мережах за сучасних умов

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Резюме

У статті розглянуто ключові чинники віральності контенту медіа у соціальних мережах. Розкрито поняття віральності, узагальнено причини, які впливають на популярність інформації, опублікованої у соціальних мережах. Виділено три найбільші групи чинників віральності: контент (його тематика, форма), аудиторія та специфіка соціальної мережі. Проаналізовано контент трьох найпопулярніших у мережі Facebook українських медіа – «Українська правда», «Громадське ТБ» і «ТСН» – для визначення чинників віральності в сучасних українських умовах. За результатами дослідження названо найпопулярніші теми контенту, які спричинюють віральність інформації. Зважаючи на специфіку алгоритму ранжирування постів у стрічці новин Facebook, простежено причини популярності певних матеріалів, які зумовлені ситуацією в країні; емоціями, які викликає публікація; типом контенту; часом активності користувачів у соціальній мережі.

Ключові слова: віральність контенту, соціальні мережі, інтернет-медіа, Facebook, інтернет.

Гусак О.А. Факторы виральности контента украинских медиа в социальных сетях в современных условиях.

Резюме. В статье рассмотрены ключевые факторы виральности контента медиа в социальных сетях. Раскрыто понятие виральности, причины, которые влияют на популярность информации, опубликованной в социальных сетях. Выделены три крупнейшие группы факторов виральности: контент (его тематика, форма), аудитория и специфика социальной сети. Проанализировано контент трех самых популярных в сети Facebook украинских медиа – «Украинская правда», «Громадське ТВ» и «ТСН» – для определения факторов виральности в современных украинских условиях. По результатам исследования названы популярные темы контента, которые вызывают виральность информации. Учитывая специфику алгоритма ранжирования постов в ленте новостей Facebook, прослежены причины популярности определенных материалов, обусловленные ситуацией в стране; эмоциями, которые вызывает публикация; типом контента; временем активности пользователей в социальной сети.

Ключевые слова: виральность контента, социальные сети, интернет-медиа, Facebook, интернет.

1. Introduction

Technological peculiarities of the development and functioning of the worldwide web and communication technologies led in general to significant differences in the processes and methods of attracting and establishing the audience of offline and online media. In recent years, there is also a huge increase of the role of social networks in the formation of both the content and the audience of modern mass media. Instant update of information on social networks, an increase in the number of information sources and other peculiarities of the new media functioning make it possible to speak about informational over-proposition, which consequently gives rise to the competition between online media and social networks, causing not only the improvement of quality and presentation of content, but also the reduction in the audience of specific media websites. Therefore, one of the tools to increase the traffic from social networks and successful media SMM-promotion is the virality of content. In addition, viral content can influence essentially public opinion and manipulate public conscience in terms of hybrid warfare and lack of clear mechanisms of informational confrontation. Using the factors of information popularity on social networks, particularly emotions it evokes, the submission style, time of publication, subject matter, and taking into account the principles of ranking reports by particular social networks – Ukrainian media can secure an effective source of audience, the popularity in a new media space and become a means of countering hybrid aggression on social networks.

Many local and foreign researchers studied media on social networks. Having analyzed the articles from the "Times", American scientists J. Berger and K. Milkman single out a number of content features, which affect its virality, in particular readers' emotions the content causes. Ukrainian researchers O. Onyshchenko, V. Gorovyi, V. Popyk consider social networks as a factor of the development of civil society. They particularly focus on the potential of these services to form the economic basis for the development of society and implement political pressure and control, considering the role of social media in organizing political protests around the world. V. Babenko analyzes the virality factors of video on the network and its potential as a tool for viral marketing on the Internet. O. Pustovalov and M. Ishmatov consider the most effective models of news spreading on social networks. They single out the factors of media popularity in each of the popular social networks. However, there is a lack of analysis of the peculiarities of preparing the virality content for social networks in Ukrainian reality. This fact determines the relevance of our study. The aim of this paper is to define the factors of content virality of Ukrainian media on social networks under conditions of hybrid warfare.

2. Research Methods

The task required a combination of general and specific scientific methods – theoretical and empirical. In particular, we used the methods of generalization and terminological analysis to clarify the definitions of the term "virality" and "virality content". Analytic and synthetic methods allowed us to single out the virality factors of the content and to get an idea of the whole system of measures applied for the promotion of information on social networks. The methods of observation and measurement were used for collecting the actual source material for the theoretical study of the factors of content virality under Ukrainian conditions; the comparison method made it possible to define the features of information popularization under special circumstances, such as the hybrid warfare. The method of content analysis was used for in-depth study of text messages of social networks in order to select the indicators, which allowed us to interpret the study results into specific recommendations concerning the promotion of media content under present-day conditions.

The methodology of our study lay in implementing the following operations:

1. Specifying the definitions of the terms "virality" and "virality content".

2. Describing the criteria of virality content due to the previous international studies.

3. Analyzing the publications of three most popular Ukrainian media, namely "Ukrayinska Pravda", "Hromadske TV" and "TSN" on their pages in Facebook.

4. Singling out the factors of content virality of Ukrainian media in the modern world due to the analysis results.

5. Proving the point on the impact of the political situation in the country and the hybrid warfare on the virality content of media on social networks.

The study methods which were applied in the analysis and met its goals and objectives together with the use of actual material and its versatile analysis guaranteed the credibility of statements and conclusions of the paper. However, the data for the analysis were collected from the pages of general political Ukrainian media with a large number of users (over 500 thousand) in Facebook for 7 days, so probably, the results may slightly differ depending on the media subject matter, the features of other social network, the number and peculiarities of readers, events and conditions in the country, which may determine the activity of the audience in another time period.

3. Results and Discussion

Virality content is the publications that have the ability to the virus-like self-replication, i.e. to the natural replication of materials by the users of social networks. The audience uses the "sharing" buttons (e.g., "tell your friends", "share", "tweet"), for spreading interesting publications [1]. The researchers of Internet communication explain the phenomenon of virality by Metcalfe law, due to which the network utility is proportional to the square of the number of its users [2]. According to this law, the reason of content virality may be in the increasing number of users interested in it, and as a result the value of the content increases.

However, it should be noted that the phenomenon of virality is more complex and versatile. In general, we can talk about three major components of virality factors:

-   content – its features, form, subject area, etc. (for example, an article consisting of 10,000 signs will be less popular among users than a striking infographics on the same subject);

-   audience (the users of social networks share only the information that will be interesting or useful among their friends, wanting to get a "bonus" in return - "like", thanks, admiration, etc.);

-   the peculiarities of social network that influence the form and type of content, as well as the activity and characteristics of the audience (the best hours for posting, peculiarities of ranging materials in the news line, etc.).

While considering the first factor of virality – the very content – one should mention the results of the studies of American scientists J. Berger and K. Milkman, who have analyzed nearly 7,000 articles, published in «Times» from August 30 to November 30, 2008 to find out the materials that have been most frequently shared by users. Having taken into account such factors as time of article posting, the author's popularity, author's sex, length and complexity of the material, J. Berger and K. Milkman revealed two characteristics which define the virality of the article. They found out that the popularity of the material depends primarily on how positive its basic idea is and how strong reader's emotions it can evoke [3]. In general, there are several features that affect virality of materials on social networks:

-   emotions the publication causes. More emotional materials are being more frequently shared on social networks. Positive emotions contribute to popularity more than negative;

-   vitally important information. The users of social networks react emotionally to the in-

formation relating to their basic needs (according to Maslow's pyramid), events that significantly affect or may affect their lives, etc;

- usefulness of the information. Users share the content that may be useful, valuable and practical. Usually, this information is posted and shared in the form of lists and short notes, rolls or instructions;

- the latest information. The content that is the first to publish the exclusive information usually gains considerable popularity among the users of social networks [4, 51].

However, considering the factor of content peculiarities together with another factor – the peculiarities of the audience, namely psychological features that encourage people to share some information, the most important factor of information virality is its ability to activate the audience emotionally [5, 108]. Only those materials that cause the state of arousal and readiness for action or encourage users to emotional activity have a chance to become viral sharing online. This is explained by the psychological state of a person caused by different emotions: positive emotions, such as inspiration, a great joy, laughter, induce us to share impressions. They also increase the activity and stimulate the feeling of fear and anger. However, such emotions as sorrow or satisfaction, vice-versa, reduce users' activity.

In addition, the content sharing on social networks is also influenced by another feature of users' psychology – the desire to get attention from their virtual friends via "like", thanks, and other methods of post appraisals on social networks; that is why the users will share only that information which is likely to attract his audience.

The popularity of content also significantly depends on the peculiarities of the very social networks: the hours of users' greatest activity on the net, the algorithms for ranking posts in the news line, etc. As the services of web analytics show, for example, in Facebook the traffic begins to grow from 9 am and falls by 4 pm. The best time for publishing materials in this network is from 1 pm to 4 pm on weekdays. As the studies show, the most clickable links appeared to be those which were posted in Facebook on Wednesday at 3 pm. The corresponding data for Twitter indicate that one can get the highest amount of clicks on this network on Monday between 1 pm and 3 pm. The Twitter audience is the most active between 9 am and 3 pm, but after 8 pm the publication of content on the network is the least effective [6]. The VKontakte network, which is popular in Ukraine, becomes most effective for posting information after 7 pm and between 1 pm and 3 pm [7]. However, one should take into consideration the peculiarities of the target audience and the subject area of the resource that can also affect the user's activity on social networks.

Besides, some networks have their own algorithm for ranking posts in the news line, so, it is important to consider this fact while creating the virality content. For example, Facebook often changes the ranking factors and one of the changes, reported by the company in 2014, was the creation of the algorithm based on trending topics and the speed of user's interaction with the post [8]. This network also continues to take into account the ranking factors from the previous EdgeRank mechanism:

- affinity (the frequency of interaction with certain users);
- type of action (e.g. a comment makes the post more valuable than "like");
- time of publication (new posts weigh more) [9].

The majority of social networks are likely to abandon the chronological news line in the nearest future. It was already announced by such popular networks as VKontakte and Instagram, so we may also consider this peculiarity of social networks as important factor of content virality.

In considering the issue of creating the virality content, it is worth mentioning not only the tools, but also the goal of sharing such viral information. With the help of virality content, the media, companies, organizations can achieve extreme popularity, better SMM indicators or conversion. Virality content makes it possible to manipulate the audience. The incredible amount of information that appears in the news line in the internet, the satiety of information space makes the users focus on the choices of other people interested in the content, and not to look for the

best posts in the net on their own. As J. Berger notes, consequently the lists of the most popular content can generate topics for wide discussion. For example, the more people see and share the article about financial reform, the more likely the others will believe that the financial reform deserves more attention from the state than the reform of environmental protection, even if the core of financial reform is not as important as the environmental one [5, 96].

Imposing certain topics for discussion on the audience aiming at diverting attention from important, but problematic issues with the help of the factors of virality content – may be regarded as the method of manipulating public consciousness that makes it possible to achieve the desired response to the information, for example, in terms of hybrid warfare.

In order to determine the factors of virality content of Ukrainian media on social networks, we have analyzed the Facebook pages of the three media that are the most popular on this network according to the rating of the Socialbakers international company in the segment of social marketing [10]: "Ukrayinska Pravda", "Hromadske TV" and "TSN" in the period from April 18 to 24, 2016. These three media have more than 500 thousand readers. Overall we have analyzed 683 pages of posts on these media.

The results of our analysis were considered in terms of such groups of factors as type of content, date and time of publication, and the subject area of messages.

The type of content that is being shared on social networks has appeared to be the one of the most important factors of post popularity. Most frequently, the pages of media under analysis contained the short messages about the content of the articles with links to the web sites with full texts. Thus, for example, all the materials on "Ukrayinska Pravda" Facebook page had the links to the web site with full texts of the articles; the "TSN" Facebook page, besides publications with links, several times posted the photos; the "Hromadske TV" Facebook page contained various types of content: photos, videos, links to the web site, gif-animations, etc. And it turned out that the posts from "Hromadske TV" on the same subjects as in other media, published at the same time, appeared to be the most popular and the most shared by the users. For example, information about the new video of "Okean Elzy" music band was published on "TSN" Facebook page at 11:16, and received 631 likes, 7 comments and 147 shares. The news was actually the link to the TSN website, where everybody could watch the very video. The same news was published on the "Hromadske TV" Facebook page at 12:08, and received 7,400 likes, 77 comments and 4,296 shares. The number of shares is nearly 30 times higher than the number of shares on TSN, probably due to the format of the post. "Hromadske TV" published the very clip on its page in the social network, not just the link to the site with this news. The mobility of users on social networks and the specificity of the services having entertainment purposes (communication, viewing photos, videos, listening to music) cause the greater popularity of the content that can be viewed immediately in the news line of the social network. This is the reason of great popularity of other such posts on various topics (pictures of V. Klychko riding a bicycle, photos from the ceremony of lighting the Olympic flame in Greece, video of Kyiv from the bird's-eye view, photos of tulips exhibition in Kyiv, video dedicated to the 26th anniversary of the Hubble telescope, etc. – they all received from 2,000 to 6,000 likes).
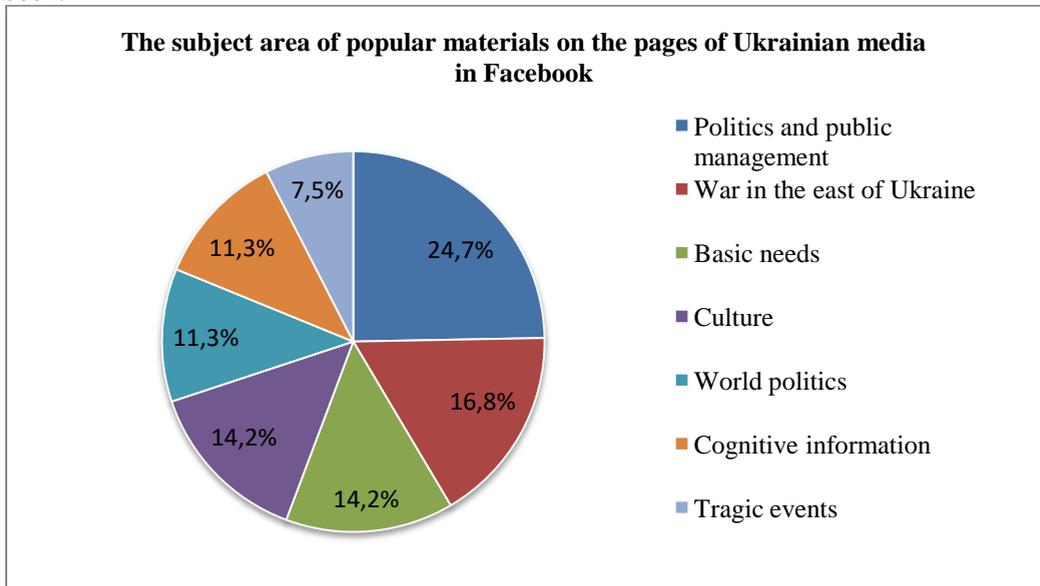
In addition to the content format, the determining factor of its popularity on social networks is the subject matter of information. According to our analysis, the most popular posts (Fig. 1) on the media pages in Facebook are the following: 24,7% on policy and public management; 16.8% on the war in the east of Ukraine; 14.2% on the culture; 14.2% on basic needs (education, health, material well-being, improvement of the city, etc.); 11.3% on world politics; 11.3% on cognitive information, sports, space, etc.; and 7.5% on tragic events in Ukraine and the world.

According to the international studies, the most viral is the content which evokes positive emotions. However, our research shows that in Ukraine, the highest percentage of the top posts is about the war and politics, which do not bring the sense of joy and satisfaction to the audience. The dominance of negative emotions in the media on social networks can be explained by the

transformation of the sense of materials on given topics into the sphere of vital needs (according to the Maslow pyramid); under the conditions of hybrid warfare, the majority of the people see politics through the lens of survival, security, ability to provide themselves with food, heat and other urgent resources. Among the most popular posts are those that have been commented by the most active users, they are also dedicated to the politics:

- "Klychko says he "decided to ride a bike to work and in the downtown" – 521 comments.
- "The new government is preparing a new rise of prices" – 414 comments.
- "If you haven't come to the session – pay a fine" (about MPs) – 280 comments.
- "Russian special squad soldiers Alexandrov and Yerofeyev are found guilty and sentenced to 14 years in prison" – 240 comments.
- "Hroisman increased MPs' salaries on the same day when they supported his candidacy for prime minister" – 229 comments.

Fig.1. The subject area of popular materials on the pages of Ukrainian media in Facebook.

The subject area of popular materials on the pages of Ukrainian media in Facebook

- Politics and public management — 24,7%
- War in the east of Ukraine — 16,8%
- Basic needs — 14,2%
- Culture — 14,2%
- World politics — 11,3%
- Cognitive information — 11,3%
- Tragic events — 7,5%

According to the algorithm of ranking information in the Facebook news line, commenting and sharing is more valuable for the post than just "liking".

The most shared posts on media pages on the social network were the following:
- The new video of "Okean Elzy" – 4,296 shares.
- When to expect the visa-free regime – 1,512 shares.
- How does Kyiv look like from the bird's-eye view – 1,268 shares.
- An Easter township is opened in the centre of Kyiv – 1,109 shares.
- Travellers created an interactive Google-map and marked there the most interesting and outstanding places in Ukraine – 829 shares.

All the most shared posts caused joyful emotions and were about the good news. This fact confirms the idea that the audience shares mostly positive data on their pages, expecting to receive some encouragement or gratitude from their friends on social networks – "like", share, etc.

The highest numbers of "likes" were received by those posts, the basic idea of which was approved by the users who referred positively to the events:
-   The new video of "Okean Elzy" – 7,400 likes.
-   "Klychko says he "decided to ride a bike to work and in the downtown" – 6,300 likes.
-   "Adidas company stops using plastic bags" – 5,300 likes.
-    "An Easter township is opened in the centre of Kyiv" – 4,900 likes.
-   "Lviv wants to ban concerts and shows of Ukrainian and foreigners who support Russian aggression and propagate separatism" – 4,000 likes.

However, one should remember that "likes" are not as valuable for ranking posts in Facebook as comments and shares.

Besides the form of the content and subject, the date and time of posting can also affect the popularity of information on social network. But the importance of this factor depends primarily on the characteristics of the social network, its algorithm for constructing user's news line, etc. For the social networks with chronological news line, the time of posting information may be crucial to its virality. But the majority of the social networks have abandoned this type of news line, and rank users' posts using more complex algorithms. Therefore, according to the analysis of Ukrainian media pages in Facebook, there is no clear evident linkage between the popularity of the content and the time of its publication. The posts that appear in the news line most often are those which have the highest interaction with the users, who comment them, share and "like" regardless of the time of posting. It should be noted that the users become most active in the evening, so the posts published in the afternoon and later usually attract more attention of the audience.

4. Conclusions

The results of the study indicate that in the current Ukrainian context, given the political situation and hybrid warfare, the most popular content on social networks is on vital topics – politics, war and basic life needs, posted in the afternoon or later, in the form of videos, photos or short texts, without links to the external resources for getting the full information. The audience most often "likes" the content, which causes positive emotions, however, according to the principles of ranking information in the news line of Facebook, the posts receive the biggest coverage of the audience when they are shared and commented by the users. So, to increase the information virality on social networks, the publication must encourage people to discuss and comment it (e.g. to include questions or calls in the text, to have some conflicting implication, etc.), correspond to the subject area of the popular topics. To be shared, the content should let the user to get reaction from friends for his/her "repost", for example, owing to the usefulness of the content, emotions of joy, pride, exaltation and importance of information to the wide audience.

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