Viral Communication and the Formation of Counter–publics

Andreas Ventsel*

1. Introduction

The aim of the article is to demonstrate that the viral text plays a vital role in creating the locus commune and communicative context of interactive communities, and in determining the political role of viral communication in reforming the borders between public and counter–publics. The Oxford Dictionary defines “virality” as “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”. Online text production has a series of qualities, which make the rapid circulation of texts particularly effective (modularity, fast modification, social media platforms that provide the tools for copying and transforming a text and making it available to a large audience with very little effort). It can be said that the possibilities of new media bring about a new era of orality in which the prevalent form of communication is folkloristic (that is, from person to person), characterized by: 1) the representation of the same original form in different variants — variativity; 2) collective authorship (Friedlander 2008: 191); and 3) the author’s (instant, explicit) interaction with the audience — interactivity. These features also enable us to understand the political aspects of the digital age and the temporary and fluid nature of the boundaries of public and private communication.

Firstly, I will explain how the concept of the “political” is understood in this article; secondly, I will elucidate the concept of the “viral text” and interpret it as a form of political communication in light of Lotman’s textual functions. This paper has a predominantly theoretical focus and it does not concentrate on any one single case study. However, I attempt to disclose the potentiality of viral texts in order to challenge the borders between public and counter–publics by providing widely known examples from Europe and Estonia.

2. Identity–creation as political process

According to Letfwich, in defining politics, the most important aspect is whether we understand it in terms of an arena or in terms of a process (2004,p. 13). In the first case, politics is understood in a narrower sense as referring to a specific arena or location (state institutions such as parliament, political parties, politicians, etc.). One of the most well known scholars to connect semiotics and studies of power, Pertti Ahonen (1987), argues that political semiotics is limited, first and foremost, to applying semiotic methods in the study of communication between political (state) institutions. For example,

2. oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/virality
Viral Communication and the Formation of Counter–publics

political campaigns and projects (see Zichermann 2006; Clark, Jacobs 2002; Ponzio 2006); political advertisements (Mcilwain 2007); or the political symbols of identity and culture (Xing–Hua 2005). In all these studies, we are dealing with the arena–based approach.

This article adheres to a broader understanding of the concept of “politics”. In this case, the type of communicative action becomes more important than the arena, and its target is — regardless of location — the transformation of relations that form subjects and the processes of identity–creation. By identities I mean semiotically formed meaningful unities, which gain their meaning and value through their relations with other identities. Thus, the political is included potentially in every social practice of signification (Marchart 2007). It is the expression of a particular structure of power–relations, which works predominantly by way of discursive exclusion and inclusion (Mouffe 2005.p. 18). According to Laclau and Mouffe, the political is defined as the institution of the social, “that is, of the definition and articulation of social relations in a field criss–crossed with antagonism” (1985,p. 153). In the case of discursive identities, exclusion means: “expelling outside itself any surplus of meaning subverting it” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001. pp. 136–137). It means that soft power works not by means of domination but mostly through the dominant meanings that constitute identities and norms.

A discursive and process–oriented viewpoint to power also enables us to use the notion of the “public” for differentiating between social and political processes, the latter being those of public importance. We can state then that if power relations can emerge potentially everywhere, it is nevertheless not useful to reduce all social processes to mechanisms of power. In practical research, we cannot overlook other aspects determining social relations (for example, economy, law, etc.). But on the other hand, every communicative phenomenon has the potential to break out from the small range of text distribution and enter into the public sphere of communication and, as a consequence, become the object of public discourse and political matter. Taking into account the purpose of this article, it also means that conceptualizing

3. Semiotically speaking, “the surplus of meaning” is an ontological basis for antagonism because in meaning–making processes we always deal with the overflow of meaning, i.e. there are more meanings than signifiers. Thus, every temporary fixation of meaning around a certain signifier entails the exclusion of the other possibilities.
politics first and foremost in processual terms as identity-creation helps us to explicate better how the communicative possibilities of the digital era blur the lines between the public and the private, the proliferation of hybrid identities, and so on.

Without wandering into techno-utopian territory, we must nevertheless admit that both the availability of information and interactivity allow the communication of people with common interests, of people who previously had no possibilities of interacting with each other and thereby achieve common goals (Mosco 2004, p. 31). Such discursive contestation is the basis for the formation of “counter-publics”: critical reflexive spaces of communicative interaction, where alternative identities and counter-discourses are developed and subsequently can come to “publicly” contest dominant discourses that frame hegemonic practices and meanings (Dahlberg 2011, p. 861). The counter-public discourses will themselves be contested and eventually transformed (Dahlberg 2007). The contestation is expressed via accepted and unaccepted actions (trolling, slacktivism, etc.) and it is predominantly associated with the demand for recognition of identification (Dahlgren 2006, 2007; Amoore 2005). The admission of discursive struggle or contestation into the process of subordinate groups is the condition of the possibilities. It also means that counter-publics do not necessarily have to be related to all democratic values (e.g. Habermasian deliberative rationality) but they need (for fulfilling the function of being counter) to allow a plurality of voices, which helps to undermine hegemonic discourses.

Thus the understanding of politics as a process allows approaching the problematic of the private and public sphere on a micro level. It does not imply that certain frames of the micro level (national or nationwide institutions) are not significant in the context of drawing demarcation lines between the public and private. Rather, the present article focuses on particular communicational strategies and processes by means of which those boundaries are being shifted and contested, and on how power-relations and identities are formed through exclusion and inclusion. Today, the proliferation of viral texts is one of the ways to direct the attention of the public (or of some specific groups, the sub-spheres of the public) to specific content(s), and in doing so, to highlight certain rifts or points of contestation. Next, I will define what “viral text” means for this article.
3. The Viral Text

In talking about virality, academic journals have often used the concept of the “meme”. Without going too deep into the critical approaches towards “meme” (see Marino 2015), I would like to simply state that, in the current paper, the concept of “meme” is replaced with that of “viral text”. Under the label of viral texts we understand a heterogeneous set of texts that share the common characteristic that they spread over a short span of time, from person to person, reaching a wide audience. They can do this both in retaining their original form or while being constantly transformed (although in this case they still retain their recognizability in a typical plot or pattern). Understanding the viral text in this manner, we manage to avoid the connotations of the concept of meme and, in addition, the concept of “viral text” enables are more clear view in a cultural semiotic framework.

3.1. The Generation Mechanism of the Viral Text

Italian semiotician Gabriele Marino (2015) has stated, pointing us towards Barthes, that in order for a viral text to emerge, there needs to be a shift/dislocation, the punctum. It is opposed to the stadium as a tradition, custom, or certain set of rules which guide meaning-making (Barthes 1981). The punctum operates as a catalyst for an explosion; it differentiates from the studium’s customs and gives to the text its individuality and creates the potential means for dispersion. According to Marino, under punctum we can classify everything from grammatical errors, ambivalence (for example, the impossible pictures studied in Leone 2014), the weird videos and images, exaggeration, to inadequacy in certain aspects or behaviors (Marino 2015).

According to Marino, all the above mentioned examples contain an error that can be described by the concept of incongruity. Drawing parallels between the punctum and error, Marino indicates the similarity of their generative function. At the same time, he does not elaborate theoretically on this point and does not show how the punctum and studium dialectically presuppose and constitute each other.

---

4. One of the most eminent researchers of virality Limor Shifman (2011) has stated that the boundaries between internet memes and viral texts are relatively vague.
The author of a dislocating and virally spreading text exists in the same intersubjective communicational space as the receiver and these texts should carry different functions in communication processes for becoming viral. That is, in every viral text, we have both the **studium** and **punctum** present since they cannot exist without each other. These concepts would not have any significance independently since the absolute domination of the **studium** would lead to an ultimate determination by the rules, and the absolute domination of the **punctum** would lead to a private language. In both of these extremes, communication becomes impossible.

The virality of a text spreading in the online culture is thus based on two basic characteristics and their careful balance. One designates familiarity, culturally coded meaning–making, the other its subversion. One operates on the basis of the agency of users (subversion), the other on their participation (cultural codes). In the following, we will bring in Lotman’s socio–communicative functions of the text and attempt to reveal the motivation of the distribution of viral texts in depth and explicate how those functions are connected with shifting the boundaries of public and counter–publics.

### 4. Political functions of the viral text

According to Lotman, a multilayered and semiotically heterogeneous text ceases to be an elementary message from sender to receiver and the socio–communicative function of that text becomes considerably more complicated in the complex of relations with the surrounding cultural context and with its readers (Lotman 1988, p. 55). It is important to stress, however, that these functions are always present simultaneously: we can only speak of tendencies dominating in certain communicational situations. In the context of viral communication these functions may be reduced to the following processes:

**a)** “Communication between addressant and addressee. A text fulfills the function of a message from the bearer of information to the audience” (ibidem). In general, this refers to the communication in which the interlocutors wish each other good luck, make jokes, banter, ironize and reflect on the everyday
and public life. From the beginning of the last decade, the term “viral marketing” has been used to cover a series of different textual production strategies. When we look at communication as an information exchange between the sender and the receiver in a framework of political communication, the attention economy is intimately related also to political image design: it is through viral texts that one can stay in the picture, spread one’s ideology, demands, identify with certain groups, demonize opponents, etc. Viral texts depicting the opponent in a negative light often have a ridiculing or ironic nature, they tend to refer to the incompetence or the failure of the adversary. Also, it is quite common to connect the opponent with some generally accepted negative characters or events. The successful preconditions of the viral communication rely in many aspects upon a shared common background, the studium (rules, values, stereotypes, etc.), which change texts from virally spreading. In the context of turning the public attention to a particular problem, the viral text functions as an agenda–setting device. Introducing and keeping an agenda in public discourse is simplified due to the dislocated structure of the virals as attention grabbers. This is exactly what happened in case of the viral that is commonly known under the name Humanity Washed Ashore. Due to the virally spreading image of the drowned boy lying on the shore, the tragedy of the Syrian war and the refugees made it into the perception of the general public and the social attitudes towards the problem were greatly influenced. Both, the British Prime Minister David Cameron and the French president François Hollande promised a more serious approach to the question of refugees. In addition, the Canadian federal elections of 2015 at the time were influenced by the fact that the boy’s family applied for asylum in Canada, but due to the sluggishness of the bureaucratic apparatus, they made their passage to Europe instead.

Viral communication therefore contests the border between the public and the counter–public by introducing certain agen-

5. buzzfeed.com/ryanhatesthis/humanity-washed-ashore#.uy6ko2yzz
Andreas Ventsel

das more effectively into the public attention, and by doing so suppresses or occludes the topicality of other agendas. By sharing viral texts, which depict some groups, persons and so on in a negative light, this logic of exclusion simultaneously functions as a mechanism of identity–creation in the viral community.

b) “Communication between the audience and the cultural tradition. A text fulfills the function of a collective cultural memory. In this capacity it discloses a capacity for continual replenishment and for retrieving some aspects of the information stored in it and temporarily or totally forgetting others” (Lotman 1988, p. 55). In addition to spreading and mixing texts, the users consider important the knowledge of the context from which the viral text originates and in which it has been used. In this sense, viral texts can act as memory triggers that bring the texts lost in cultural periphery back into circulation, and, for the attentive user, enables them to reanimate the cultural tradition related to the texts.

Peeter Torop argues that the Internet has given to the concepts “repetition in culture” and “intertextuality” a new meaning. If intertextuality in traditional texts means signification through relations with other texts and traditions where those texts belong (relations both encoded in the text by the author as well as accidental relations), then the intertextuality of digital culture usually signifies the variation of the same text in different forms and media. (Torop 2013). For example, Youtube exhibits extremely favorable conditions for intertextuality (ibidem).

In the framework of political communication, it is important to note that this kind of intertextuality makes it difficult to ascertain both the original texts and the number of interpretations, and the relations between the texts can often be random and associative. It is not possible, therefore, to interpret these texts. In order to draw on a single source text, one has to take into account the whole abstract mental field around it; a field that functions as the memory mechanism of the culture (Torop

7. Some of the most important organizing centers of viral culture are specific archiving systems, for example Know Your Meme (2008), a site that collects, catalogues and counts viral texts systematically.
The constituent parts of the hypermedia text are in some aspects more independent from the original structure of the text (Manovich 2001, p. 41): they can be quite easily used as separate entities in new contexts, which increases the possibility — as compared to traditional significational strategies — to potentially undermine the dominant cultural traditions by re-signifying and re-interpreting them ironically. This happened with a videogame made by Evgeny Zhurov, a Russian video blogger in the city of Novosibirsk, who created and uploaded an online video defending Russian imperialism on his Facebook account8. The video went viral; it was facilitated by the fact that it was tweeted by the Russian deputy Prime Minister and the former ambassador to NATO, Dmitri Rogozin, Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves and Alexander Vershbow, an American ambassador and current deputy Secretary-General of NATO. Zhurov’s video claimed that “historically, places such as Siberia, Ukraine and the Baltic States have prospered thanks to Russian occupation, and have since declined and failed to modernize without Russia’s guidance”9. The punctum of the viral text was constituted by the collision of different interpretations of history. The pre-condition for virality is extremely fascinating: the undermining/legitimization of certain perspectives on history was done via a genre of videogames; a discourse which, at first sight, stands completely outside from the discourses of politics and history. The memory signs of the video game (e.g. Baltic perfumes and sophisticated products that are used to exemplify the positive results of the Soviet occupation) actualize particular interpreters’ perspectives of history. It is further reflected by its international attention. The game received fiery support, but also criticism. It was even accused of the vulgar forgery of the history. A clip, uploaded on Facebook — semi–public communicational space — whose aim was not to contribute to pro– or contra–argumentation about the official approaches to history, caused a heated public discussion between polarized discourses (West versus Russia).

8. youtube.com/watch?v=T6sSzwHAbes
9. europe.newsweek.com/pro-russian-imperialism-video-goes-viral-310926?rm=eu
“Communication of the reader with the text. Manifesting intellectual properties, a highly organized text ceases to be merely a mediator in the act of communication for the both the author (addressant) and the reader (addressee), it may work as an independent intellectual structure, playing an active and independent role in dialogue” (Lotman 1988, pp. 55–56). As compared to the old media, the new media objects (texts) enable multidirectional communication and call for active participation from the audience (Howard 2008, p. 200). It is known that hypertextuality is one of the essential characteristics of new media textual production since it enables the user itself to control the modes through which to interact with the content of online communication. This can be carried out in a multi-linear manner, in which case it is not determined as to how one enters into hypertextuality. The hypertext offers the audience the possibility to experience the text differently, in a way that is not so dependent on the intentions of the author/creator (Lister et al. 2003, p. 27). Responding to hypermedia texts interactively can take many different forms. For example, it is possible to generate viral responses to viral texts: the politician, Jaak Madison, from the Estonian nationalist party EKRE uploaded a tweet with the hashtag #absurd that generated a great number of humorous responses. Jaak Madison tweeted in May 2015: “I was at the Kalev–Rock game and the song for the last cheerleading pause was in Russian. I left. #absurd.” Although Madison’s tweet appeared over a year ago, the #absurd jokes are still topical and we can still find new versions emerging.

Interactivity also makes it possible to respond to viral texts in commentary sections. This is what happened on the 98th anniversary of the Republic of Estonia in 2016, when the chief of squad of Ida–Harju region of the North Tallinn Rescue Center, Sergei Menkov, uploaded a parade video to Facebook in which he — during his working hours — disrespectfully com-

---

mented on the Estonian Defence Forces’ military equipment. The trigger of a viral text is its inappropriateness (in a particular context): a civil servant criticizes the state in his working hours and he uploads the video on the Internet. The video received an extraordinary response in social media, helping both the video to become viral and to finally get Menkov dismissed from the Rescue Board. It is also possible to demand that certain texts be taken down, that damages be reimbursed, etc. Keeping the above in mind, hypertextuality directs us to one of the essential features of online communication: interactivity and, through it, to the potentiality to emancipate from power relations. Various forms of interactivity and peer-production allow the formation of wider counter-publics and viral communities. The circulation of viral texts is kept up by the new transformations of text (critical or ironical), which are also used for contesting the authority of a hegemonic discourse.

d) “Communication of the reader with himself […] During this type of communication of the recipient of information with himself, a text helping to reorganize the personality of the reader and change its structural self-orientation” (Lotman 1988, p. 55). A viral text can act here as a catalyst for self-reflection and as a autocommunicative processes of the reader or some Internet community. The liking, sharing, mixing, etc. of texts brings about — whether consciously or unconsciously — the self-formation and the identification with, or opposition to, certain values. In the present article it is important to stress that through this kind of sharing and mixing one takes part in a communal message exchange. The semantic value of a text does not always have to be significant (the source texts of the virals are relatively invariable), but this fact is compensated for by the potential of creating communal ties. Messages created in the “right” way guarantee a positive feedback loop, which in turn adds to the motivation and reassurance for further communication/interaction (Hall, Cappella 2008, p. 77). In this case, the viral text carries out the phatic function. The phatic function is a “set for CONTACT” that “may be displayed by a profuse exchange of ritualized formulas” (Jakobson 1960, p. 355). Viral texts here operate as certain locus commune that
first and foremost serve an indexical value. In small Internet communities it is extremely common to exchange own codes and symbols which to an outsider are either unnoticeable or insignificant. As a matter of principle, the autocommunication is present in every act of communication (Lotman 2000). In the previous example (Humanity Washed Ashore, Menkov, Madisson) we can see a communication, which transfers a new message (bringing the topic into the agenda, mocking, demonizing). We can also see autocommunicative communication where the quantity of new information is not very high, but it is compensated for with the identification of some common values and ideas (sympathizing with the refugees, condemning the views that are not coherent with Estonian values). Lotman stresses that this function is extremely significant in texts which carry elevated axiological value (Lotman 1988, p. 55). The death of the child, humanity and Estonian statehood are the topics, which activated the self-reflective potentiality of the viral texts (in the level of individuals or online communities).

The autocommunication of an Internet community creates the potential for the formation and maintenance of wider counter–publics. This type of counter–publics is developed predominantly around some commonly shared general values. This prevalence of the phatic function in online communication has in recent years been pointed out by several studies (Kulkarni 2013; Marwick, boyd 2011; Radovanovic, Ragnedda 2012; Schandorf 2013; Tufekci 2008), which is why it can be regarded as a fashionable term in the studies of hypermedia communication.

c) “Communication between a text and the cultural context. In this case the text is not an agent of a communicative act, but a full fledged participant in it, as a source or a receiver of information and the opening of different concealed codings according to the context” (Lotman 1988, p. 56). I argued before that a viral text is composed on the basis of the tension between the unpredictable punctum and the familiar tradition, the studium that serves as the background against which the punctum can function in its idiosyncrasy. Thus the familiar designates: 1) the memory of virals as a genre, and 2) the context in which the
virals emerged and spread, marking the attitudes of an online community towards a topical theme. Shifman notes that virals usually represent certain stereotypes from pop cultural contexts, the types that are very relatable (2012).

In addition to simply reflecting the context, which refers to the function of reaffirming the power–relation (representing dominant stereotypes), virals also actively create their own context. In their book, *Nudge — Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth and Happiness* (2008), Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler have drawn our attention to the architects of choice that organize the context in which people can make choices freely, however being first unconsciously nudged toward a particular choice. For example, there are cases in which the information acquired by hacking phones, Facebook accounts, Skype calls and e-mails is leaked into the media and other social media channels in hope that the information will become self–spreading and viral and that it would reduce the opposing party’s credibility, or that it will generate a media uproar that causes the feelings, and not the facts, to set the agenda and discourse for the news. The latter is well illustrated by the Russian–Ukranian conflict: both the “Fuck the EU”12 quote by a US diplomat and the conversation between the Estonian Foreign Minister and Mrs. Ashton13 were recorded and published (allegedly by Russia) in order to reduce the credibility of the European Union as one party involved in the conflict. Whether the content was true or not is not always important if we are talking about influencing a media discourse and thus the ensuring a dominant position for a certain news story in media channels (Nissen 2015, pp. 111–112). Those viral texts are very often ripped out from their former contexts, and the important reason for their instant spreading lies in the meaningful effect of using them in a new communication situation. One of the consequences here could also be the distraction from other topical problems, as it was in the case of agenda setting described under the first function of a text in communication between sender and receiver.

The virals that create their own context are often initiated by the counter–publics. Nevertheless, it may also by the result of coopera-

12. youtube.com/watch?v=CL_GShyGv30
13. youtube.com/watch?v=7zl4g64gV-w
tion, and as the previous example demonstrated, the recordings of the conversation between Ashton and Paet were first published in Vkontakte (a Russian version of Facebook) and then picked up by an official Russian TV channel.

5. Conclusion

In the above, I have indicated some socio–communicative functions of the viral text and how these functions could be understood in the context of power relations and in the reformulation of the boundaries between public and counter–publics. As previously argued, various socio–communicative functions simultaneously co–exist in a communication situation. In some cases we can distinguish a tendency when the function of transmitting of information (agenda setting) is dominated by the function of autocommunication which serves the purpose of group–formation and facilitation of the cohesion of online–communities. Also, every modification of a text entails the reformatting the context. It is also important to emphasize that virals may undermine as well as facilitate the dominant discourses and in such processes they often shift the boundaries between the public and counter–publics. Today, the majority of political, cultural and social lives is mediated by digital media, which implies new textual experiences and a totally new experience of identity and community, but also creates new borders between private and public life. Virals are a type of text by which the above–mentioned processes take place. The perspective of cultural semiotics enables us to shed some new light on those meaning–making processes.

References


