

A CASE STUDY ON VIRAL JOURNALISM IN GREECE: THE FIGURES, THE TRENDS AND THE FACTORS OF SUCCESS

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ABSTRACT

In the era of social media, the concept of viral is a hub. But then, from the field of advertising and marketing, it is the turn of journalism to be affected by it. In recent years, websites such as buzzfeed and boredpanda have grown steadily and have reached a state in which -, according to statistics, they gather millions of users daily. The main characteristic of these websites is the fact that they are largely based on the viral journalism phenomenon, that is, they include small and light stories that have all the features of a viral content. The aim of these stories is to be shared by the users as much as possible on social networks and the web at large. Also, a second important feature of these websites is that they invite their readers to "upload" their own interesting content, thus giving them the opportunity to become journalists in some way and their content to become viral as well, exploding at the same time the user generated content (UGC) phenomenon. The aim of this article is to study the phenomenon of viral journalism in Greece, centered on the Mikropragmata (<http://mikropragmata.lifo.gr>), a column of the free press Lifo that has become so large that it has acquired its own micro-site and corresponding channels in social media. By studying the content of the website, we will try to understand what kinds of articles are posted and which appear to be more successful to the public. How do readers react? Are there any similar examples in Greece? In order to answer these questions, an online survey will be carried out. Quantitative and qualitative data will be gathered on the website under study and other relevant examples from Greece and abroad, as well.

Keywords: viral journalism, crowd journalism, social media, user generated content.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of virality emerged from the beginning of the Internet and expanded rapidly in the era of social media. The ability, thanks to technology, to directly share the

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content to many people at the same time and in a way the audience wants to, changed the circumstances in the field of public relations, advertising and marketing.

We use the internet and social media mainly for communication. Everything that has to do with communication has been affected by those two, and journalism was influenced as well.

Journalism, which according to many suffers a credibility crisis, has been confronted with the phenomenon of citizen journalism. Citizens, with their mobile phones and an internet connection, had the advantage of being at the point of the events while they were taking place, so they were operating much faster than professional journalists.

As technology and social networks continued to grow, a shift of attention began to the content of journalism and how it could spread rapidly. Websites such as BuzzFeed, and later Boredpanda, have been slowly, yet continually, emerging relying on just this function: simple and easy-to-read content that can be read and shared quickly by their audience.

The idea that the public is the one who evaluates the news and the content in general is not new. Well known is the example of Reddit, a social news platform where users up-vote or down-vote news and content depending on whether they like it or not. The content is actually posted by the users themselves while the discussion is very intense and active. Reddit, particularly popular in America, is the inspiration but also often the source for news websites and not only.

In this article we will talk about the site Mikropragmata, a column of the Greek free press Lifo, which in the course of the years grew so much that it acquired its own small website, a microsite inside the central one. This column is based on the corresponding BuzzFeed platform, something that, for the first time, brings to Greece the concept of viral journalism.

What are the similarities and differences of the Greek website with the corresponding US? What content does it contain? What effects does this new kind of content appear to have on journalism and ultimately on citizens' journalism? Finally, what is the role of technology throughout this transition?

CITIZENS' JOURNALISM

The basis of all this discussion, about the change in the way the media produce and circulate their content, lies in the so-called citizens' journalism.

According to King (2017), the first time the term citizen's journalism was heard was after the 2004 tsunami and referred to those who were there at the time of the disaster and were able to capture videos or photographs or even describe their experience immediately after. It is generally used to characterize those who are in the right place, at the wrong time, with their mobile in their hands and the corresponding temper, to capture what they see or, even worse, what they are experiencing. Veglis and Bratsas (2017) refer to citizen journalism in association with social media journalism in the broader context of data journalism, thus signifying the importance of interrelation among the various axes of contemporary news production conditions.

Numerous terms have been used for citizen's journalism, each of which is based on a different or distinct feature. For example, many use the term "user-generated content", as mentioned above, which focuses on the content producer. In the academic field, this term is used to state the user of the social media who produces the shared content. A similar term is also the "audience material". There is also the term "citizen witnessing", which refers more to the advantage of citizen journalists being in the right place when

it is needed. Finally, there are terms such as “networked journalism”, “process journalism”, “journalistic journalism”, “alternative journalism”, “liquid journalism” and “ambient journalism” that have more focus on journalism and how it is influenced by this development (Luce et al, 2016).

One element to be highlighted is the role of technology in the emergence of the phenomenon. None of this would have been possible if there was no technological factor, either in terms of devices (mobile phones) or in terms of internet connectivity (3G-4G) or the concept of the Internet itself and social media (Bulkley, 2012). Technology has changed both the way we produce and the way we distribute the content of journalism, so we get to talk about viral journalism by borrowing the term used for social media. Now the journalistic content, in vast majority, is made to be shared by the users. If this does not happen, it is considered to be unsuccessful (Bebić and Volarević, 2016).

This role of technology is analogous to the one played in the general development of social media, which in fact transformed users from passive consumers to active producers. This idea is what eventually led to the evolution of this role in citizens' journalism (Bruns and Highfield, 2012).

The majority of experts believe that this is a phenomenon that will not disappear in the coming years. It may change shape and features, but it seems to cover a gap left by traditional journalism and at the same time offers the opportunity to hear other opinions that perhaps in traditional media cannot be heard or even recorded (King, 2017).

How do the big and established media organizations react to this phenomenon? At first, with difficulty and doubt, but over time they found that they need to adapt if they wanted to survive (King, 2017). Now it is not just the production of news, but also how they circulate them, how they are "advertised". Citizens' journalism, as well as the concept of viral journalism, targets not only the production of content but also how it is circulated and can attract public interest. The rationale of this idea goes like that: if the content attracts interest, the user will share it and perhaps comment, and only then it can count as a success (Bebić and Volarević, 2016).

The fact that corporate media organizations are trying to adapt to the new reality does not mean that this is done without losing or stumbling. Many times, there is no happy ending, as shown by the example of Huffington Post, one of the first organizations to "use" the citizens and which in the process ended up withdrawing this model of operation with the justification of its inability to protect its readers from the tsunami of fake news (Smillie, 2018).

Another topic of discussion is also the relationship between the amateur citizen journalists and the professional ones. There are few who believe that prosumers, producers and consumers at the same time (like amateur journalists) are the ones who will overwhelm the profession in the coming years, opinion which is intensified by the crisis in the field and seems clear if one considers the mass redundancies in the media organizations in many countries. The media, from amateur journalists, draw cheap or even completely free material that they would otherwise have to pay, and much expensive, to be done by a professional (Καϊτατζή-Γουίτλοκ, 2010, p. 530).

Overall, however, it seems that the participation (in the form of light involvement) of citizens in journalism will remain exactly that: participation. The role of journalists is complicated and such involvement of citizens could only be complementary to the profession or involve very specific and specialized issues (Καϊτατζή-Γουίτλοκ, 2010, p.

530). This relationship, even if it is complementary, is quite significant. Citizens, when producing content and publishing it, are essentially giving material to traditional media, highlighting issues that might not have entered the radar of other media (Wall, 2017).

Nevertheless, the involvement of the citizens in the production and the promotion of their content gives the feeling -which may sometimes be true- that they shape the news agenda and that they are reading topics of interest to them, since they have chosen them (Bebić and Volarević, 2016). At the same time, professional journalists, if they combine their own reportage with their counterparts on the same subject, they will be able to present a more integrated and holistic view of the subject, which can only add value to the produced content in terms of updated and integrated coverage (Bulkley, 2012).

It is important to take ethical issues under consideration as well. Despite the great dependence that we see from the content of journalists, traditional journalists have been "trained" in ethics and rules, something that has not happened to the citizens with respect to the values of traditional journalism. That is why we see many of the subjects of citizen journalism touching the edges, with many negative reactions when they emerge. Privacy, respect for the rights of others and protection of personality are elements that often escape from the ordinary citizen trying to "catch" the news story (Wall, 2017).

Of course, there are still objections to whether we should consider websites like BuzzFeed and Mikropragmata journalistic, but nobody can deny that there is a change in how we see the production and distribution of news. Nowadays, there is no reporting but communication of news, and the conceptual differences of these two words are perhaps the essence of the whole debate about viral journalism. This, combined with the concepts of user-generated content and user-circulated content, give an overall picture of the new reality we see in the field of journalism (Bebić and Volarević, 2016).

From the study of the cases we have seen, the key to success seems to be how you write the articles, how you create the content. If the user feels that the content he is sharing is written like he would write it/send it to his friend, then he will support it even more (Lafrance, 2012). Besides, it should not be forgotten that the sharing of news and content in general is the trend of the decade, taking the lead from the searching for news that was dominant in the past decade (Kümpel et al, 2015). The involvement of users in the circulation of news, in their creation and/or sharing, is enough to create a community and "tie" them to the whole process, as they will feel it like their own content and promote it as such (Beckett, 2010).

THE CASE OF BUZZFEED

Buzzfeed was founded in 2006 and at first it was nothing more than a funny video aggregator (Tandoc Jr and Jenkins, 2015). Few people thought it would become one of the most powerful players in the online content market, with an impressive number of visitors 12 years later. For example, in 2017 BuzzFeed had more than 65 billion video views, which translates into equally stunning amounts of advertising (Spangler, 2018).

Its content, to a large extent, consists of material produced by the users themselves and either discovered by the authors of the website or submitted directly by the users to the platform. Its features are beautiful titles, usually with questions to draw attention, lists of everything anyone can imagine, a collection of funny pictures and videos (Bebić and Volarević, 2016). The size of its articles varies, from very short to really long ones (especially now that includes purely journalistic texts), but this does not exclude the

presence of articles that are essentially repeating the same images, for example at different zoom levels.

Using hashtags on all social media is a valuable tool for a BuzzFeed editor as they are the "data" that lead them to the content they want, after they do their research. Of course, much of its overall strength is drawn from social media themselves, and more specifically from Facebook, since more than 70% of its traffic comes from it (Tandoc Jr and Jenkins, 2015).

Its impact on content and journalism is so great that we have now reached the point of talking about the Buzzfeedification of journalism; so powerful are the features it has managed to impose on the field. Even large media organizations seem to adopt its playful style, with little quizzes, funny pictures and videos or even special viral sections in their main menu (Tandoc Jr and Jenkins, 2015). Apart from the style of content, we are talking about shorter articles and in some cases more humorous, something that is greatly suggested by the major journalist organizations to their journalists (Calderone, 2013).

Buzzfeed, as we have seen, has, besides lists and quizzes, also hired professional journalists who carry out "regular" informational topics (Rowan, 2014). But it also preserves the type of articles that made it famous, small loose articles that do not require any reflection (Tandoc Jr, 2017). Interestingly, there was quite a reaction among the journalists when BuzzFeed started to present more "serious" issues, such as when it started to have correspondents in the White House, which aroused the question of how this combination of content could become reality (Lafrance, 2012).

This raises two questions: First, we have to ask ourselves if these "light" topics do not in fact require thinking. Many people claim that BuzzFeed, through funny lists or tests, informs its audience about important topics without the readers understanding it, so there is no shame or remorse when they read about them (Gilley, 2015). Sometimes even we get surprised by the fact that the various humorous quizzes we take in our free time are proven to be so true. Are they eventually not so random and light and could have some psychological basis (Butler and Dewy, 2014)? On the other hand, it is interesting to study why the Buzzfeed felt it necessary to turn to classic journalism once it had such a successful model. Perhaps traditional journalism as we know it still stands?

THE CASE OF MIKROPRAGMATA

Mikropragmata is the continuation of the corresponding column that could be found in the Greek free press Lifo. The column, which was present in both the print and the electronic version of Lifo, has as its editor the journalist Aris Dimokidis who has the general supervision but writes many of the articles as well, as opposed to other chief editors from traditional media.

This column was so successful that they decided to create a separate site (along with separate social media accounts) to host it separately and to grow it even further. This transition has become more and more successful, its statistics are extremely impressive if we consider that it has an independent presence for only about a year (as of the writing of this paper). Its website, mikropragmata.lifo.gr, reaches 2 million visitors each month (<http://www.statshow.com>), its profile on Facebook has 29K likes and on Instagram has 1.5K followers. Also, its content is still accessible on the main site of Lifo (with a link to the microsite) and these statistics are even more impressive with over 3

million visitors each month, 718K likes on Facebook, 233K followers on Twitter, and 68,3K followers on Instagram.

By looking at the structure of the site, one can see at first glance that there are many similarities to the corresponding BuzzFeed website. There is the same mark for articles that are trending while there are categories "lol", "wtf", and quizzes.

By studying the content more carefully, we can see that it has been influenced by BuzzFeed. Of course, there is not yet the variety we encounter on the American site, but there are very frequent updates of content, active presence in social media and active commentary, with answers even from its author, who writes and comments with his real name, which seems to have gained approval and public trust.

The themes of the website include articles from the news, often with a humorous look but often with the seriousness that suits them. Besides, issues such as human rights and animal rights issues, police reports, health issues, social issues, etc. are also being tackled. It also includes several quizzes that can be totally for fun, but they can also give some form of knowledge, such as geography or language tests. There is also a section with various lists of interesting things.

A large part of the website takes up the content coming from its audience or from the internet and social media in general. There is a special category called social and includes mainly topical issues but focused on how the public sees them. In the social category the editors of the site gather the public's reactions and its comments from the social media posts and create corresponding articles. There are also issues of Greek news, which are the majority, but also foreign themes, not only about famous people or celebrities but also about everyday people who the Greek reader could put himself in their place.

There is a community category that includes guest posts from well-known –but also from unknown– columnists who simply had their text sent for posting and it was uploaded to the website. Finally, there is a column with strange news.

Its content could generally be said to occupy the entire spectrum, from serious issues to extremes which could be considered a risk for the Greek audience. However, these issues go up, people are asked to comment and discuss, but there is always the urge to be civilized and respectful.

The readers' participation is so great that in some topical issues the comments are so many that the editors gather them and write a special article with the readers' reactions. Interestingly, too extreme views can be included as part of the reactions, which shows that censorship is tried to be avoided.

In general, we see that the content of this website relies heavily on public participation in two directions: in the most important topics of the news, the audience is urged to be involved with discussion and comments, while, on the other hand, they are invited to produce their own content, either by a guest post, or by reposting the posts from their personal social media. These posts, if they are public, can easily be gathered and "organized" to create articles, lists or trigger more serious articles.

Traffic statistics, which are steadily rising and the positive ratings it receives in social media, show that this success will continue and increase. This way of dealing with reality, with humor and "real" articles without wooden language seems to fit into the Greek readership, which is anyway known that treats even the most difficult situations with humor. It is also the great memes collections that even saddle the most serious issues and solve even the most difficult disputes. A website that gives the impression that it

has been created to a point by its users is more easily earning the positive vote and love of the audience.

DISCUSSION

Starting with citizens' journalism and examples of social networks like Reddit, we see that the internet has blurred the boundaries for journalism, information and communication in general. What is becoming clearer, however, is that the reading audience requires that it is no longer treated as a passive consumer for anything they feed it but rather wants to be given the opportunity to define what it wants to read and how it wants to read it. Besides, the audience asks for the opportunity to hear its own voice, whether in simple, everyday matters or even more serious and complicated, as it feels that traditional journalism does not represent it as it should.

Citizens' journalism, always with the ally of technology, gives the audience the opportunity it wants. The breadth of the phenomenon is so great that the journalistic scene is changing, with traditional journalists worrying that they will no longer be necessary, with new websites being created that are modeled to function in participatory terms, just like this (see BuzzFeed) and with the major journalistic organizations to try to stay in the journalistic and commercial race.

The focus is transferred from the simple information and opinion to the person: the person shares his experiences, the person creates the agenda of the news, the person creates the content and finally the person interacts with it, he evaluates it and rewards it by resharing it.

The example of BuzzFeed shows us that the battle for journalism has finally become a battle of content. The more intellectually appealing, visually attractive and easily shareable the content, the more successful (Bebić and Volarević, 2016). That is why we have come to mention the term viral journalism as a term that will prevail increasingly in the future.

But this does not mean that this content is not of high quality. We mentioned topics that were covered and are particularly serious, just the way they were described was not what we would expect. This fact seems to have a positive effect on the audience that is being informed, but it does it with more fun, without the feeling of seriousness or even shame.

Trends show that viral journalism, and citizens' journalism in general, will never be able to replace traditional journalism. There will always be a need for professional journalists as they have the training to take into account issues such as ethics and news junction.

Professional journalists try to adapt to the new facts, changing their way of writing, trying to make themselves more accessible to the general public, to approach people and to convince them that they are there for them and that they work for them.

On the other hand, citizens' journalism, as a broader concept, is not stagnant. Since it is so much dependent on the technological factor, as technology and its means change (internet, social media), it also has to adapt to new data. Consequently, nowadays there are three, perhaps more, forms of citizen journalism:

The first and original form is the simple recording of events as they happen before even the traditional journalists reach the site. The production of this content is voluntary by the citizen, as he records it to share it later in his network.

The second form that can be noticed recently is the emergence of the news. As mentioned above, citizens through social media and content sharing on their network highlight news, events and stories that might otherwise not have been known. In this second form, the citizens become uninformed producers of traditional media. The concept of viral journalism, which claims that what is widely shared, is worth mentioning, even if the issue does not concern the news or the current situation, is central here.

More lately, we see a third form, and that of inadvertent production, which is now on the rise. It is the production of the content of viral journalism by the users themselves. How? Through the content that they themselves raise to social media, content that has not been produced with the logic of the first, original form we mentioned above. It is more personal content, but it is primary material for articles. Also, basic material for this form of citizen journalism is the reactions of users during their internet and social media experience; their comments, their photos, their experiences become raw material for content based solely on it.

Certainly, as technology advances, other forms of journalism will emerge, which will affect even more the traditional journalism. Technology will inevitably play its own important role as it provides the means to make it all happen. Questions that can be raised about copyright, user privacy, and digital labor, because of the works of users that are given free to websites and news agencies, are open issues to explore.

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