

NEW YORK

Vulture Reading Room!

And Then There's This: How Stories Live And Die In Viral Culture

by Bill Wasik



A PowerPoint Analysis by David Rees, Internet Has-Been

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“Anyone Can Do Anything With This... One Love”

Legal Mumbo-Jumbo

- *Full disclosure:* **Bill Wasik** is a friendly acquaintance with whom I socialize once every 1.5 years (according to the leather-bound social diary in my mind)
- *Full disclosure:* **The Internet** is a constant companion/tormentor/(sometimes) lover with whom I interact 10+ hours/day (according to my Safari cache)... to what end, I know not.
- *Full disclosure:* Per **Microsoft PowerPoint's End User License Agreement**, I am legally obligated to type the following:

MAY ALL HONOR AND PRAISE BE BESTOWED UPON BILL GATES

Now That That's Out Of The Way...

Let's take a deep breath and have some **FUN!**
(Shouts to Sam, Virginia, Charlie, and Anil)



“Random Thoughts From The Mind of David”



- I'm going to start with my favorite passage of the book: When Wasik is planning his St. Patrick's Cathedral flash mob (the one Charlie mentioned), and walks out into the 2003 blackout: a surreal, shared phenomenon *“born not of a will to metaspectacle but of basic human need.”* (p. 40)
 - I recommend keeping the blackout in mind as a sort of symbolic barometer of true virality; the irony being that, even as the Internet provides everyone with traffic stats and community-node-analyses and whathaveyou, there's a tendency to lose sight of what is **objectively viral** in favor of what **you and your crew forward each other**.
 - In this regard, I find Wasik's charts useful, because they sometimes **undermine my awe of his viral-culture-sorcery**. I notice that his most successful web project was **clobbered, trafficwise**, by some stupid video for some stupid razor company.
 - This isn't to say that, like BzzAgents Heffernan and Dash, I didn't recoil at the aesthetics of said charts. Serif fonts have no place in the presentation of data. Ben Schott's legacy will be one of **ASHES**.

“A Friendly Question About Some Of These Internet Words”

- Are people using “viral” and “meme” interchangeably? We should be wary of that, even if Richard “*I Love Jesus*” Dawkins did it from the get-go. (See Wasik p. 27)
 - Because I thought **memes** stuck around our culture in deep hidden places, influencing us for years, whereas 90% of all **viral** internet culture doesn’t influence anything or anyone... it’s just crazy random stuff that makes us smile.
 - **What will/could “Chocolate Rain” ever influence, in any way?** To me, it’s like The Shaggs: Something that exists so far outside of regular culture, it hurts my mind to try to place it in context or even explain it to my Mom.



"A Word About Moms & Viral Culture"



"My children should know valuable information."

- **Speaking of my Mom... I know it's a cheap joke, "Ha-ha, my Mom doesn't understand some cool internet thing my friends and I are into," but really, when it comes to viral culture, MOMS CRUSH US.**
 - When my Mom sends me an email with a warning about, *Don't use your cell phone at the gas station, it'll make the pump explode*, or *Here's a Quicktime movie Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Kurt Vonnegut made about life lessons*, I know I am having an authentic viral experience...
 - **Per Heffernan**, I'm not directed to some outside link where I do the digging... the viral culture is ALL UP IN MY BUSINESS, IN MY INBOX, panting and sweating like a fevered dog.
 - **Contra Wasik**, the viral culture most Moms send is **not** the result of calculated, viral-meme-optimization design, a.k.a. What would Gawker link to?
 - From p. 15 of Wasik's Introduction: "*In viral culture, we are all driven by the ratings, the numbers, the Internet equivalent of the box-office gross.*"
 - LOL, Projection much? Because I GUARANTEE whoever wrote the email about cell phones and gas stations wasn't employing some meta-cultural analytic toolset about page rankings ...
 - ... or, if they were, it was in the tautological sense of, **ANYONE WHO CHOOSES TO COMMUNICATE IN A MEDIUM WILL PROBABLY SPEND A MINUTE THINKING ABOUT HOW TO COMMUNICATE IN THAT MEDIUM**, eg "I can't send an MP3 with a fax machine."

D.F.W. MEMORIAL SLIDE-SIZED MEGA-FOOTNOTE SLIDE

- In the previous slide, I used “Moms” as shorthand for “*Anyone who doesn’t have friends working in the Conde Nast building,*” i.e. people living outside the **Media-Industrial Complex**-- which still exists and is still powerful, no matter how valiantly Tay Zonday and the LOLCats roll their own.
 - In this sense, Wasik is the ultimate NON-MOM, since he’s balls-deep in the media world (as Anil has pointed out), which makes his experiments in viral culture different than 99% of those of his fellow-cyber-dabblers. **Does it make them less authentic(ally viral)?** Must we view Wasik with the same contempt he views corporate-marketing douchebags who appropriate viral culture?
 - **I SAY NO**, because it is *impossible* to view anyone with the same contempt demanded by corporate-marketing douchebags who lounge around be-pooltabled “creative zones” trying to hornswoggle Internet addicts on behalf of their dumb-ass deodorants or energy drinks or golden soccer shoes or whatever...
 - ... and I am writing this as someone who once had his book “buzzed” by BzzAgents (see Wasik’s chapter 4); go to Amazon and read their fake-ass positive reviews if you don’t believe me.
 - The irony here being, said book was *published on the strength of its reputation as an authentically viral phenomenon!* (People faxed it to each other, pre-Internet.) **KILL ME NOW.**





Something Awesome Wasik Wrote

EVERYBODY TURN TO PAGE 135 RIGHT NOW!!!!

“Call it the *age of the model*: our meta-analyses of culture (tipping points, long tails, crossing chasms, ideaviruses) have come to seem **more relevant and vital than the content of culture itself**. We have lived with mass culture long enough, understand it well enough, to see that it is formulaic and constructed, to know that it plays upon us systematically. And so we see the real vigorish is in learning not about what is cool than about how cool works (*sic?*): we want to understand the process, abstract it out to steps and charts.” (*My emphasis*)

Putting aside the fact that the first sentence, if true, is incredibly depressing and should compel us to outlaw *Freakonomics* and *The Tipping Point* and beat their readers to death with the instruments of culture (ie, violas), and **putting aside the vibe** that Wasik’s “we” more likely describes media professionals and hipsters than email-forwarding moms, does this passage’s vision of “our” jaded relationship to the mechanics of culture explain the **bewildered ecstasy** engendered in “us” by a “Chocolate Rain” or “David After Dentist” or any *un-focus-group-able* explosion of personal vision? Because for me, one of the glories of “Chocolate Rain” is that it has been viewed *over 30 million times*. That is a true cause for celebration, right? WE STILL GOT IT!

"A Few Notes Towards A Taxonomy Of Viral Culture"



"What on earth are those two doing with that cup?" *

One of the things this book did was provoke an argument between my friend and me about different types of viral culture, eg: *Can anything with Arianna Huffington's imprimatur honestly be counted among the legions of the viral? The #2 video in Youtube history is by Avril Lavigne; is THAT viral? What if some old-timey TV clip gets rediscovered and forwarded around ... has its virality been constructed... or REVEALED? Is there anything more poignant than revisiting a viral Youtube fave and finding it cluttered with its creator's attempts to cash in? (CLICK HERE TO BUY THE "LEAVE BRITNEY ALONE" SUDOKU COLLECTION!!!)*

After our argument, my friend spent an hour browsing videos of people smoking salvia. Go figure.

* No, I've never watched it. Why?

BECAUSE I'M NOT A PERVERT.

“A Few Notes Towards A Taxonomy Of Viral Culture” Page 2

- Pre-Internet Viral Culture
 - CHILDREN STUFF: “Guess what Adidas stands for?” “Step on a crack, break your mother’s back,” etc. Urban legends, rhymes, etc. (In this case, schools and summer camps are the petri dishes; a role now assumed by the Internet.)
 - HIPSTER STUFF: Andre The Giant Has A Posse stickers; Farting Preacher (Bootleg VHS Edition); Church of the Subgenius; **Heavy Metal Parking Lot**



“A Few Notes Towards A Taxonomy Of Viral Culture” Page 3

- INTERNET STUFF (as opposed to email stuff):
 - INDIVIDUALLY MADE (“Chocolate Rain”)
 - CORPORATE-MADE (“Subservient Chicken”)
 - DELIBERATELY VIRAL (All corporate-made stuff, as well as [Wasik thinks] most individual stuff)
 - ACCIDENTALLY VIRAL (Most of the good stuff)
 - DESIGNED FOR THE INTERNET (Web pages, Youtube shorts)
 - DESIGNED FOR OTHER MEDIA (TV clips, audio captures)

NOTE: This is a work in progress. Soon we’ll be able to plot all viral-cultural phenomena on a grid of my design that will tell you if you’re enjoying the right things.