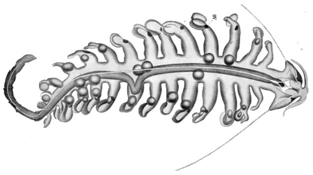
'VIRAL' MARKETING

Andrea Natella

KOOK
ARTGENCY

VIRAL ‘K’ MARKETING

Andrea Natella



▶ *We are all susceptible to the pull of viral ideas. Like mass hysteria. Or a tune that gets into your head that you keep on humming all day until you spread it to someone else. Jokes. Urban legends. Crackpot religions. Marxism. No matter how smart we get, there is always this deep irrational part that makes us potential hosts for self-replicating information.*

Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash*[1]

▶ *Viral marketing and viral advertising are buzzwords referring to marketing techniques that use pre-existing social networks to produce increases in brand awareness or to achieve other marketing objectives (such as product sales) through self-replicating viral processes, analogous to the spread of virus or computer viruses.*

Wikipedia, *Viral Marketing*[2]

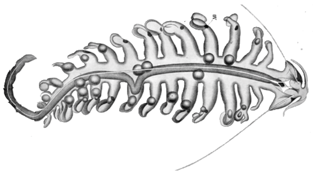
In 1898 Dutch botanist Martinus Beijerinck was the first to identify the agent of a strange epidemic that struck the *solanaceae* family, plants such as potatoes, eggplants, tomatoes, peppers and tobacco. By filtering of tobacco leaves, Beijerinck was able to isolate the *tobacco mosaic virus*, the first virus identified by man.
In order to succeed in this endeavor, Beijerinck used a filter that had been invented just a few years before Charles Chamberland. It was a porcelain filter that was able to retain particles when heated, and up until that moment they had never been detected. The following pages are an attempt to heat up the viral marketing world in order

to see what remains from Chamberland's metaphorical filter. That is, to identify the characteristics of communication's viral content that is shared among users. We will attempt to take the biological world's similarities seriously, to verify the extent to which this metaphor may be comparable to the typical problems involved in advertising.

In recent times, the metaphor at the heart of viral marketing has gradually weakened. Social media has constituted an actual autonomous field of investments by virtue of its power in terms of measurability. The focus has thus shifted from virology to epidemiology, from the virus to its replication environment. Now that the numbers associated with social media have demonstrated their intrinsic fragility, it is even more necessary to not lose sight of the virus' role, the multiplying agent that distinguishes each effective and successful viral campaign.

▸ HOT MAIL ◂

The term *viral marketing* was made popular in 1996 by the venture capitalists at Draper Fisher Jurvetson in order to support their investment on Hotmail, one of the very first free email services available on the web. The term was used to describe the speed at which new users adopted Hotmail. The strategy was simple, and still today it is the key to every winning strategy: the product must include an advertising function. Historically, this has always occurred thanks to the



intrinsic features of the product itself: *the goodness of the product*.

In recent times, since the 1950's, the product's intrinsic value was joined by its design: *the beauty of the product*. Hotmail's success celebrates a third possibility; that is, the fact that the product incorporates a verbal or paraverbal element of self-promotion: *the braveness of the product*.

The solution adopted by Hotmail's marketers was probably instinctive: the bottom of each email sent included a simple tag-line "*Get your private, free e-mail at http://www.hotmail.com*". It's as if they had produced t-shirts that said "buy a t-shirt just like this own". In Hotmail's case, however, the strategy really worked.

Hotmail's message was effective despite the fact that it was so explicit and direct thanks to the fact that it presented 1) a free service that was 2) easy to explain to others who could 3) quickly activate it since they were 4) encouraged by advantages that 5) can be shared 6) thanks to a technical network that existed before the message itself.

In his famous article on Web Marketing Today[3] in 2000, Ralph F. Wilson theorized and made known six principles of viral marketing. Thanks to the identification of these principles, Hotmail rapidly became a benchmark for viral marketing.

However, when we speak about viral marketing today, we almost never refer to products that naturally incorporate these six elements of virality. The object of promotion may be of any kind, and the viral marketer's task is that of creating a relationship with the consumer, whose objectives are analogous to those reached by Hotmail.

In order to do this, we must rely on external factors that are not related to the product, instruments of symbolic mediation, such as videos, applications, advergames or websites. They are mediators that symbolically include the product itself: brand values, features, shape, etc.

These mediators are the "ghost" of a viral product like Hotmail, but they have the advantage of being infinitely replicable, and they allow a precise measurement in terms of user fruition redemption.

Although the measurement of final results may be very accurate, the possibility of foreseeing such results is always a game of chance. As in epidemiological processes, results depend on the aggressiveness that the virus is able to demonstrate within the environment. Therefore, the effectiveness depends on the creativity's strength, which can be measured only at the end of the process. The epidemic development is fluid, asymptotic, Brownian, and it is never entirely predictable, except for the aspects that are sustained by more traditional instruments, such as banners, ads, digital PR etc.

The only certain measurement within a viral process may be determined at the end of the process, when the virus has been eradicated or has become endemic. For this reason, despite the emphasis on the measurability allowed via social media, virality's logic responds to reasonings that are more similar to those of the chaos theory rather than a Newtonian cause and effect mechanic. As in meteorology, the success of a viral campaign depends on stochastic movements, infinite

trajectories and strange attractors. It is only through the determination of initial conditions and the knowledge of viral mechanisms that one may anticipate the results, rather than ending up playing the role of rain dancers in a company's courtyard.

OBLIGATE PARASITES

Viruses are biological entities that are incapable of reproducing themselves autonomously. They are not living organisms in the proper sense in that they do not possess the biochemical or biosynthetic structures necessary for their replication. Viruses would be unable to live, or better yet, they would already be extinct had they not found a creative way to compensate for this condition: they penetrate within the cells and use their structures in order to replicate themselves. Science defines this way of life with the term "*obligate intracellular parasitism*". In other words, viruses are obligated to be parasites; otherwise they would be unable to reproduce and would become extinct in the first generation.

It is creativity that saves viruses from death: creativity in the shape of a text, written in genetic code that must be comprehended by the structures of parasite cells.

As a matter of fact, what the virus aims to preserve isn't its individual existence, but rather the identity of its species, its unique contribution to the living ecosystem: its genetic heritage.

It is to preserve this treasure that the gene pool is always hidden from the cell by a *capsid*, a protein capsule coded by the viral genome. If the host cell does not accept the capsid, then the gene pool is not able to reproduce and is destined to extinction. This is what occurs with most viruses. The cell defends itself from the invasion and the virus is unable to penetrate it, or the cell does not understand the virus' message or simply ignores it. As during the siege of Troy, the horse must be recognized as a peace offering so that the doors of the city may open. However, if the soldiers that step down from the Trojan horse simply aim to conquer the city, in a virus' case the soldiers come down and use Troy as a factory to build new horses with which to conquer new cities to then be transformed into factories.

▸ COMPUTER ALGORITHMS ◂

Before becoming a fascination for the marketing world, this recursive mechanic infected computer science and became a metaphor to explain the operation of a specific category of computer malware.

Just like biological viruses, computer viruses are incapable of producing an effect unless they have infected at least a file within a computer's memory. The virus is able to copy itself unto other files in the hosting machine and other systems tied to it, from the very first file. Infected software begins to function in ways that are unintended by its code and it

responds to the virus' replication needs and to the malicious purposes aimed at by those who designed it.

In order to achieve these results, computer viruses adopt a dissimulation strategy. They hide their identity from the software and communicate with files without arousing suspicion, presenting themselves as if they were data that the file is used to sharing with its external environment. Through this creative programming subterfuge computer viruses reach their objective: to increase the population and multiply their effects. Like biological viruses, computer viruses do not pursue the life of a single program, rather that of a genetic heritage that is called *algorithm* in the computer science world. An algorithm is a mathematical model that aims to solve a problem. It is a concept that expresses the tension toward an effect in a direct and immediate way. The genetic heritage obviously also contemplates an effect since it is responsible for the phenotype's development. However, the algorithm underlines the exhatological function with more evidence, since it is by definition "a method to produce a result". If genetic heritage causes us to look at the horse, with an algorithm we see the conquest of thousands of cities transformed into Trojan horses producing factories.

▸OBLIGATED CREATIVITY◂

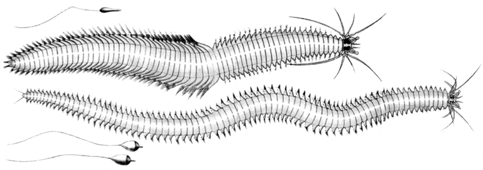
These are the characteristics that allowed the term "viral" to find its places with ease and elegance next to the word "marketing". Thus, viral marketing became a technique that takes advantage of social networks, via mechanisms that are analogous to those of biological and computer viruses, in order to increase brand awareness or obtain other commercial goals.

In this case, the virus is a *symbolic mediator* that can assume the shape of a video, a website, an advergame, or even simple text. These formats take upon the role of mediators since they encode a marketing algorithm, a set of instructions for consumers, aimed at the product's valorization.

As in the case of biological or computer viruses, what is essential is not the message's replication, but the propagation of its algorithm: *the brand's genetic heritage*.

In the biological world, the capsid's structure with which the virus presents itself to the cells is one of the effects specified in its genetic makeup. In computer science as in viral marketing, the way in which viral makeup is presented to the public is instead a creative invention. Both the programmer's and the creative's task is that of imagining and creating a symbolic mediator with the same characteristics of "inseparability" that in nature make the genetic makeup and the capsid a single biological entity. In computer jargon one would say that it's about producing a "*good hack*", a creation in which elegance and function fuse naturally.

When the symbolic mediator's diffusion is tested, it must be



strong enough to preserve the genetic heritage of recombinant dynamics that can damage the brand's identity and message. This is the reason why the true strategic factor of each campaign is its creativity.

The perfect viral message should be as effective as Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*[4], a neurolinguistic virus capable of directly affecting the human brain's profound structures, or Chuck Palahniuk's *Lullaby*[5], an African chant that causes the death of those who listen to it.

▸VIRUSES AND VIROIDS◂

It is often said that the most successful viral videos have one thing in common: they were created with spontaneity, oblivious of the consequences; in other words, they were not intended to be viral. Such statements are incorrect.

Videos that are produced with naivety cannot achieve any preordained communication objective. Audiences are aware of its innocence and exclusively evaluate its explicit content without raising barriers when it comes to judging or censoring the producer's intentions. Thanks to this characteristic, naive content is able to generate a much wider diffusion more easily. Although they have epidemiological characteristics that are similar to those of viral videos, they are missing a distinctive genetic heritage distinguished by the capsid. The video does not communicate anything aside from itself. If we had wanted to use a biological metaphor, we could talk about *viroids*.

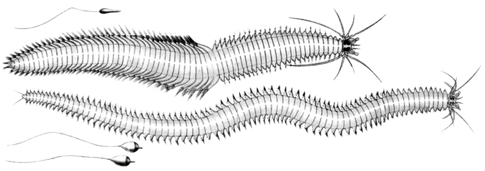
Viroids are biological entities that are simpler than viruses as they do not have capsids. Their genetic heritage and their explicit message are the same, and there is no room to articulate brand communication.

It’s a major difference for those who want to create a viral marketing campaign. The confusion between viruses and viroids has often led to a certain creative automatism. Symbolic mediators are built, emulating the statistically most diffused characteristics of successful viroid content. That’s where trite viralty formulas come into play, like “*sex, pets and absurd*” or the “*three b rule*”: *blood, banging, bullshit*.

In substance, in order to guarantee the virality of a message such as that of a video clip, all a symbolic mediator needs to do is play with sexual double entendres, show a cute and clumsy kitten, an incredible car accident, or a strange person engaging in a completely meaningless activity.

The images may be from those of a low quality cell phone to a surveillance camera or instead take advantage of the latest technology in post-production. The product is used with the same logic of the worst product placement strategies, or better yet, with a simple commercial-like packshot.

This is supposed to be the recipe to excite web users and push them to share content. And from a certain point of view, the recipe works. The best videos created with these recipes are able to circulate effectively, reaching the number that marketing managers expect from them.



However, there are few companies whose core values are expressed by the “three b” principle, and even in these cases it is always difficult to make a solid and coherent link between the symbolic mediator and the brand’s heritage.

How are the brand’s values structured in those clips? Will the glue that holds the product’s virality and communication together hold? The risk is that the cute, little kitten expresses values that are different from those that the brand wants to communicate, or that the power of the images is too strong and that the user remembers about the kitten, completely forgetting about the product. Not to mention the risks involved in editing, making remixes or spoofs on behalf of active users that can cut or substitute the advertising announcement.

When you enter the viral communication world, the recombinant dynamics are a factor that must be taken into account in advance in order to avoid dispersing genetic heritage and the brand’s identity. Word of mouth’s drawbacks reemerge despite digital reproduction. As in the *chinese whispers*, what the first player says never corresponds with what the last person in the chain understands.

▸ WORD OF MOUTH ◂

The success of the expression “word of mouth” associated with the diffusion of digital marketing content seems like a paradox. The expression was born in the 17th century in the army to refer to the transmission of an order, from one soldier to the next in a row of soldiers. With the diffusion of mass communication media, the meaning of the expression extended to explain the diffusion of oral information that escaped technical reproducibility.

The escape from conventional communication tools exploded during the digital revolution. In a world where everything becomes reproducible, word of mouth manifests itself by subtraction, like a noise or an unidentified object.

When writing is uprooted from any kind of device as in the digital universe, the text becomes an orphan. Instead, word of mouth has never been the product of any device; it is born free without any form of Oedipal complexes. It can therefore accurately indicate the informal diffusion of information that hasn’t been intended to reach specific objectives.

Word of mouth presents itself innocently, like a virus’ capsid that approaches a cell to infect, but can dissimulate specific communication content. And that’s the exact aspect that survives from the origin of the expression.

The word that passed from one soldier to the next was used to convey a command, an algorithm, a military function that was independent from the meaning of the word that was transmitted.

Although the use of word of mouth has been widely used as an intelligence tool for disinformation operations, until today the special features and the power of word of mouth in the marketing world have been used in a more empiric way, rather than a scientific one.

Socio-anthropological studies provide us with a more accurate analysis of word of mouth, explaining which linguistic mechanisms facilitate the passage of genes that can be transmitted by word of mouth. Two formats have been identified that have been able to bend the conversational logic of “orality” to the need to maximize “verbal reproducibility”. *Jokes* and *urban legends* are two forms of oral storytelling that more than any other have traveled across the *press revolution* and through mass and digital communications retaining their identity. Two different narrative structures whose rhetoric’s have been identified and operation mechanics delineated.

Both are short, emotional narratives, composed so that they facilitate memorization and consequent repetition. The message always emphasizes elements that respond to the anthropological need to verify and strengthen human relations. The psychological motive that drives humans to tell a joke or an urban legend is always the desire to consolidate social relationships through the sharing of feelings or values. The same reasons drive users to share viral content on the web: the need to build a social identity, affirmation of oneself through the presentation of aesthetic or ethical content, the search or consolidation of a relationship.

▸URBAN LEGENDS AND JOKES◂

Urban legends are unusual stories told as if they were true, rarely arousing laughter on behalf of its listeners. According to Jan Harold Brunvand[6], leading academic expert on urban legends, each legend conveys content containing values, a social fear or prejudice. In order to guarantee its emotional value, the stories are always presented as if they truly occurred to a friend of a friend. The magnitude of their impact increases based on the number of people who tell the story as if true, attributing it to different friends or introducing individual variations.

Rather than weakening the virality of urban legends, these narrative alterations act as a Darwinian strategy in terms of “adaptation to the environment”.

These are mutations that just like the case of a virus, guarantee a longer life span for the legend, in addition to a greater persistence of the heritage of values transmitted.

Jokes work differently. At the base, lies have a simpler reversal mechanism, turning a normal situation into something comical or ridiculous. This reversal, which normally happens at the end of a story, creates a surprise effect and triggers laughter on behalf of the listener. The act of sharing the hilarity is the mechanism that lies at the base of a joke’s virality; it is the affirmation or the confirmation of a human relationship.

For this reason, the margin of reinterpretation of a joke is very low. Contrary to what occurs with urban legends, making

textual changes to a joke is always a difficult task that may jeopardize the effectiveness of the virality of the story. The interpretation and the paraverbal mimicry – the ability to tell the joke - play a decisive role that may determine the success or failure of the same text.

On the other hand, when it comes to urban legends, modifying the text may multiply the chances of infection, and thereby guarantee the survival of the values' existence. When it comes to jokes, there is only one perfect interpretation.

According to this point of view, the linguistic mechanism at the base of the joke is similar to that of viroids. Jokes communicate nothing but themselves and this is why they are destined to disappear when they are no longer funny, that is, when the historical or cultural context with which they were linked changes.

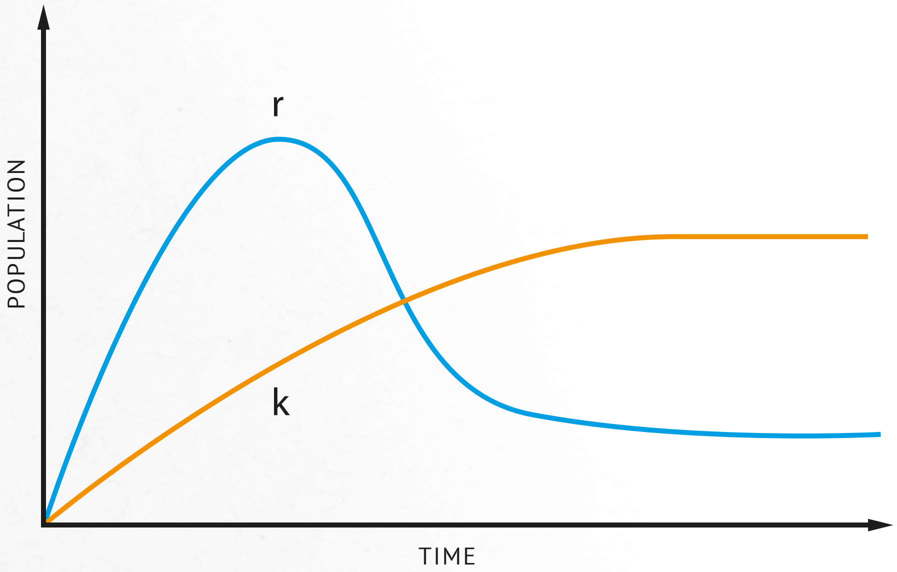
▸ r/K STRATEGY ◂

There is a theoretical model in ecology that describes the dynamic by which a population from a specific species grows and affirms itself within an eco system. It is a mathematical model that considers two variable principles:

r is the species' *biotic potential* that is defined by parameters such as fertility, the achievement of a fertile age, gestation time etc.

K is the environmental *carrying capacity* that expresses the maximum number of individuals from the species that may be maintained stably in an environment.

The development of the population of each species depends on its biotic potential and its resistance to the environment. This development can be graphically represented by means of a mathematical curve that describes the developmental strategy of the species.



The analysis of the demographic development of the different species has allowed the recognition of two extreme behaviors, respectively marked as *r strategy* and *K strategy*. The first strategy is typical of simple organisms such as bacteria, fungi, algae, invertebrates, fish, weed, and it is characterized by rapid growth curves in short term periods and unstable and decreasing trends over long term periods. The typical case is that of ostriches that each year lay 500 million of eggs that are untreated.

The absence of parental care is the cause of the inability to adapt. As a matter of fact, when oysters are immersed in the correct marine habitat they grow rapidly, but if the environment is inappropriate, they do not have the resources to find evolutionary alternatives.
On the other hand, the K strategy is most frequently found in evolved species such as birds or mammals, organisms with slow growth rates who reach a balance thanks to their ability to adapt, once they've reached the environmental carrying capacity. As opposed to the r strategy species, the population's development does not tend to suffer sudden collapses, rather it has an asymptotic behavior towards the maximum carrying capacity. A good example is that of primates who give birth an average of every five years, during which they can give each new member of the species the cognitive tools to survive environmental contingencies and possible future adversities.

We can judge viral marketing campaigns through the *r/K model* and verify if this model can suggest a new approach to plan campaigns. Let's consider the creativity as the biotic potential and the potentially reachable target as the environmental carrying capacity. They are the two key factors in any communication campaign's design. By analyzing these two factors we can predict the campaign's outcome in terms of *r/K strategy*. In this way, we will have campaigns that rapidly infect the target and then disappear from the agenda, along with others that take off more slowly, but with a longer persistence over time.
Both strategies can be effective if they reach the communication

environment's carrying capacity, that is, the entire potentially achievable target. In principle, if the target is wide and must be achieved quickly, one needs to develop an r strategy with an elevated biotic potential. An easy to understand and general creativity, such as *sex, pets and absurd*, may be the most effective choice. Users smile and are willing to share the fun moment with their friends. A campaign of this type will most likely not be efficient in accurately communicating the values of the product but, if it is well-structured it can achieve a high number of contacts. Conversely, in order to communicate the brand's values to a specific target persistently over time, the best approach is K strategy: a campaign that triggers a narrative reflection rather than leveraging a sharing impulse.

However, the ecological model emphasizes the fact that when the number of species competing in the same environment increases, the carrying capacity decreases. The growth and development of every living species becomes more difficult. Similarly, in a communication environment with an overload of viral campaigns, the survival of each campaign becomes more difficult. The user is subject to a *viral overload*, in other words, an information overload, which leads him or her to strengthen their immune system and choose what to share and what not to share more carefully.
Of course, "r type" campaigns are less likely to be successful in this kind of context. In order to obtain satisfying results, there is the need for either a more elevated biotic potential, or an artificial environmental doping through more traditional

means such as insertions, banners, digital PR etc.

For this reason, campaigns with r strategies are more likely to succeed when they are aimed at environmental niches, very narrow targets whose idiolects must be interpreted. In this way, the carrying capacity is diminished and the chances for success increase.

▸ SEEDING ◂

Niches can play a strategic role. They may act as the microenvironment in which one may incubate *seeding*'s first delicate phase, the insemination phase in which where and how to publish the viral content is established. As a matter of fact, it is evident that if there isn't a *zero patient*, the virus cannot exist. Successful viroids develop normally, beginning from a naive or unaware seeding.

The author simply shares content with his or her network of friends and counts on their proactivity.

We can imagine that there are thousands of potentially successful viral content buried in the wall of anonymous authors simply because they have attracted the attention of their closest networks. This content may randomly explode at any time when it ends up under the attention of the right "sneezer".

Clearly this situation is not compatible with any marketing plan. A viral campaign requires a clear identification of the target and must find the best channels to reach at least part of it. The better this portion is identified, the better are the chances and the speed with which it reaches the carrier environment.

Seeding is a strategic variable in the design of a viral campaign precisely for this reason. It is necessary to select the proper websites, blogs, mailing lists, discussion groups and *trendsetters* to whom entrust the inoculation phase of the campaign. It is a phase that should not be considered according to quantitative parameters.

If the symbolic mediator is created with the right biotic potential, it is ideally sufficient to identify or contact a single patient zero. Very often there are viral campaigns that are launched with advertising logics and are forcibly supported with massive ads and aggressive digital PR activities.

It is a paradox that arises from preventive accounting needs that cannot be reconciled with a viral approach.

The seeding phase is always decisive but it is must be planned with the same logic that drives the virus creation. If the seeding investment is higher than the investment required in creating a symbolic mediator, we are not dealing with a viral campaign.

K strategy campaigns may be activated with reduced seeding intensity since the carrying capacity of the communication environment will oppose its inertial resistance to the biotic potential. Even when we rely on an r strategy, the seeding plan must be led by qualitative logics, by the search for initial targets calibrated by needs established by emotions and values.

▸VIRAL MARKETING◂

If we take a look at today's viral marketing campaigns, we can easily identify campaigns with an *"r" joke* structure and campaigns with a *"K" urban legend* structure". Campaigns with a "type r" structure are the ones that play with the reversal of normal situations, such as candid cameras or popular viral videos. Their strength is in the humor generated by their surprise effect. It's the same effect created by viral videos with kittens, children, embarrassing moments or incredible talents. What users share is the common empathy generated by the comic or dramatic dimension of the symbolic content.

Their elevated biotic potential is based on simple emotions and not on ethical or moral values or stories. For this reason, even when they become pandemic, "type r" campaigns always risk losing their link with the company's strategic elements. The brand's heritage may be lost or forgotten by the audience, not only because it can easily be recombined by users, but because the virality's last component may expire upon the final laugh. This risk is more rare in "type K" campaigns since they are supported by a narrative and values that innervate the viral content, but are also part of the *brand's equity*.
Therefore, a "type K" campaign is capable of greater persistence because it heavily relies on cultural elements that don't stop at sharing, but call for reflection. For this reason, each kind of remediation (editing, fake, spoof etc.) represent an evolutionary factor that contributes to the survival of the

genome, and therefore to brand awareness. Thus, the social sharing environment becomes a resource that allows the virus to mutate in order to infect unexpected targets. "Type K" campaigns may latently survive within social networks and therefore, reemerge in a new way in order to adapt to the social climate. That is, Henry Jenkins'[7] spreadable media, content created in a more inclusive and participatory way that diffuse and engulf the web to become part of the cultural panorama. In other words, we could say that the "*r strategy*" is *emotional, rapid, and incursive*. Instead, "*K strategy*" is *engaging, persistent, and participatory*. When you evaluate a viral marketing campaign, you must always keep in mind that the one that makes you laugh more isn't necessarily the right one.

NOTE

1. Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, pp. 351-352, ed. Shake, 1995.
2. Wikipedia voce: *Viral marketing*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viral_marketing, 2012.
3. Ralph F. Wilson, *The Six Simple Principles of Viral Marketing*, http://webmarketingtoday.com/articles/viral-principles/, 2000.
4. Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, ed. Shake, 1995.
5. Chuck Palahniuk, *Lullaby*, ed. Mondadori, 2005.
6. Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*, W. W. Norton & Company, 1981.
7. Henry Jenkins, *If It Doesn't Spread, It's Dead*, www.henryjenkins.org/2009/02/if_it_doesnt_spread_its_dead_p.html, 2009.

-

Andrea Natella *is partner and creative director of KOOK Artgency with whom he realized the thisman.org project.*

Graphic: *Matteo Carlino and Francesco Croce (KOOK Artgency)*

Translation from Italian: *Lydia D'Agostino*

www.kook.it

creative commons
BY NC SA

KOOK
ARTGENCY