IF IT DOESN’T SPREAD, IT’S DEAD

Creating Value in a Spreadable Marketplace

by Henry Jenkins, Xiaochang Li, and Ana Domb Krauskopf
with Joshua Green
# Executive Summary

- Definitional Fuzziness
- People and The Problem of Agency
- From Viral to Spreadability

## Part One:
**Spreadable and Sticky:** Two Paradigms

- Spreadable and Sticky — Two Models of Media Contact

## Part Two:
**The Environment for Spreadable Media**

- Widgetization
- Plenitude
- The Long Tail
- Social Networks
- Participatory Culture

## Part Three:
**The Gift Economy and Commodity Culture**

- Spreadability and the Moral Economy
- Gift Giving and Reciprocity Online
- Lewis Hyde: Thinking Through the Gift Economy
- Value, Worth and the Transfer of Meaning

## Part Four:
**Communities of Users**

- Rethinking the Individual Consumer
- Rethinking Communities

## Part Five:
**Spreadable Content**

- What makes content worth spreading
- Spreadable Texts
- How to Make Content “Spreadable”
- Producerly Texts: Cultural Commodities that become Cultural Resources
- Advertising as “Producerly” Cultural Commodities

## Part Six:
**Spreadability: Aesthetic and Structural Strategies**

- Humor
- Parody’s Promises and Perils
- Information Seeking
- Unfinished Content
- Nostalgia and Community

## Conclusion:
**The Value of Spreadable Media**

## Bibliography and Further Reading
Use of the terms “viral” and “memes” by those in the marketing, advertising and media industries may be creating more confusion than clarity. Both these terms rely on a biological metaphor to explain the way media content moves through cultures, a metaphor that confuses the actual power relations between producers, properties, brands, and consumers. Both have been used so loosely they can refer to everything from word-of-mouth marketing efforts to remix videos to popular content in ways that don’t help us understand the nature of these different activities and the potential relationships between them. Both terms seek to explain the process of cultural transmission but do so in such a way they strip aside the social and cultural contexts in which ideas circulate, and the human choices which determine which ideas get replicated.

Talking about memes and viral media places an emphasis on the replication of the original idea, which fails to consider the everyday reality of communication — that ideas get transformed, repurposed, or distorted as they pass from hand to hand, a process which has been accelerated as we move into network culture. Arguably, those ideas which survive are those which can be most easily appropriated and reworked by a range of different communities. In focusing on the involuntary transmission of ideas by unaware consumers, these models allow advertisers and media producers to hold onto an inflated sense of their own power to shape the communication process, even as unruly behavior by consumers becomes a source of great anxiety within the media industry. A close look at particular examples of Internet “memes” or “viruses” highlight the ways they have mutated as they have traveled through an increasingly participatory culture.

Given these limitations, we are proposing an alternative model which we think better accounts for how and why media content circulates at the present time, the idea of spreadable media.
A spreadable model emphasizes the activity of consumers — or what Grant McCracken calls “multipliers” — in shaping the circulation of media content, often expanding potential meanings and opening up brands to unanticipated new markets. Rather than emphasizing the direct replication of “memes,” a spreadable model assumes that the repurposing and transformation of media content adds value, allowing media content to be localized to diverse contexts of use. This notion of spreadability is intended as a contrast to older models of stickiness which emphasize centralized control over distribution and attempts to maintain ‘purity’ of message.

**Schema Comparing Spreadability vs. Stickiness**

- Stickiness seeks to attract and hold the attention of site visitors; spreadability seeks to motivate and facilitate the efforts of fans and enthusiasts to “spread” the word.

- Stickiness depends on concentrating the attention of all interested parties on a specific site or through a specific channel; spreadability seeks to expand consumer awareness by dispersing the content across many potential points of contact.

- Stickiness depends on creating a unified consumer experience as consumers enter into branded spaces; spreadability depends on creating a diversified experience as brands enter into the spaces where people already live and interact.

- Stickiness depends on prestructured interactivity to shape visitor experiences; spreadability relies on open-ended participation as diversely motivated but deeply engaged consumers retrofit content to the contours of different niche communities.

- Stickiness typically tracks the migrations of individual consumers within a site; spreadability maps the flow of ideas through social networks.

- Under stickiness, a sales force markets to consumers; under spreadability, grassroots intermediaries become advocates for brands.

- Stickiness is a logical outgrowth of the shift from broadcasting’s push model to the web’s pull model; spreadability restores some aspects of the push model through relying on consumers to circulate the content within their own communities.

- Under stickiness, producers, marketers, and consumers are separate and distinct roles; spreadability depends on increased collaboration across and even a blurring of the distinction between these roles.

- Stickiness depends on a finite number of channels for communicating with consumers; spreadability takes for granted an almost infinite number of often localized and many times temporary networks through which media content circulates.
• On a technical level, **widgetization** makes it much easier for us to bring branded media content into our own spaces.

• **Plentitude** – the fragmentation and diversification of cultural life – provides the cultural context which requires a much stronger match between consumer interest and the available content, thus creating a space which might support niche media and which would demand the customization of mass media content to local particulars.

• The **Long Tail** model reflects a rethinking of business plans to reflect the risks and opportunities that emerge from this fragmentation and localization of the mass media marketplace.

• **Online social networks** provide mechanisms which allow trusted recommendations to spread across different but intersecting communities of interest, which blur the boundaries between virtual and real world social interactions, and which allow consumers to assert stronger social ties with brands, stars, and media properties.

• **Participatory culture** allows consumers to take media in their own hands, not simply selecting content from the menu of available options, but also producing their own media, often in explicit response to previously circulating materials.

The focus on spreadable media requires greater attention be paid to the social relations between media producers and consumers. There are significant differences between what motivates consumers to spread content and what motivates producers to seek the circulation of their brands. These differences can be understood in terms of the contrast between **commodity culture** and the **gift economy**. Drawing on ideas from Lewis Hyde and Grant McCracken, we outline the defining traits of these two systems of exchange.

For media properties to move from the commodity culture in which it is produced to the gift economy through which it circulates and has value, it must pass through a point where “value” gets transformed into “worth”, where what has a price becomes priceless, where economic investment gives way to sentimental investment. Recognizing this takes place, and understanding how this occurs, is crucial to understanding what motivates consumers to “spread” advertising and other media content within their social networks. When people pass along content, they are not doing so as paid employees motivated by economic gain; they are **doing so as members of social communities involved in activities which are meaningful to them** on either an individual or social level.

Those texts which spread the furthest and most rapidly show signs of what John Fiske calls the “producerly”: their structures are
open ended enough to allow diverse communities to appropriate them and deploy them to express local meanings and interpretations. For this to occur, the producers have to give up a certain degree of control over their messages as well as over the contexts in which they circulate. Under this model, cultural materials, such as advertisements, become the raw materials which community members use to express shared meanings or to reaffirm social ties with each other. It is their openness to such reworking which allows these cultural goods to function as “gifts” and thus to acquire “worth” within particular social contexts.

The role of the consumer or audience is in flux in this era of spreadable media. Consumers help to produce meaning around advertisements; they help to spread messages. Sometimes they are fans, sometimes critics. We are struggling to come up with a meaningful vocabulary to talk about these new sets of relationships. At the same time, we need to adopt a range of different models for describing the new kinds of communities which are emerging within a networked culture. Media spreads in different ways through Pools (organized around a shared goal or interest), Webs (organized through interlocking social ties), and Hubs (organized around a dominant personality); the spread of media is also impacted through different kinds of barriers of entry into communities which can encourage stronger or weaker social ties, greater or less participation, or more or less opportunities to exchange media with others.

We need to develop a better understanding of how the circulation of information enhances people’s sense of affiliation within communities. Researchers have found, for example, that the circulation of rumors serve symbolic or expressive functions far beyond the credibility of the information they contain.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMMUNITY EFFECTS OF INFORMATION CIRCULATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• To bolster camaraderie and articulate the (presumably shared) experiences and values that identify oneself as belong to a particular community (“bolstering their identity”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To gather information and explain difficult to understand events or circumstances.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To establish the boundaries of an “in-group”.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FOUR BASIC FACTORS ATTRIBUTED TO SPREADABILITY

- they contain absurd humor or parody;
- they pose puzzles or enigmas which encourage us to seek out other information
- they are incomplete without our active participation
- they express themes of community and nostalgia which are central themes of the gift economy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commodity Culture</th>
<th>Gift Economy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contractual Arrangements</td>
<td>Social Norms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reckoned Transactions</td>
<td>Reciprocity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynamic Social Relations</td>
<td>Dynamic Circulation of Goods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivated by Financial Gain</td>
<td>Motivated by Status and Reputation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Value</td>
<td>Sentimental Worth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fantasy: Freedom, Individuality and Transformation</td>
<td>Fantasy: Nostalgia, Community, Continuity, Tradition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everything can be Bought and Sold</td>
<td>Not all gifts can be accepted</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We are still in a transitional moment as the era of stickiness gives way to the age of spreadability, making it difficult to make broad recommendations for how specific companies should respond to the potentials and risks involved in this more decentralized model for delivering branded content. In the near future, many companies are going to be reluctant to give up the perceived ability to lock down content and control consumer’s attention as represented in the old stickiness model. Other companies will embrace spreadability as a way of getting their brands in front of new consumers and lowering the cost of advertising campaigns.

**BUSINESS ADVANTAGES OF EMBRACING SPREADABILITY STRATEGIES**

- Spreadability may help to expand and intensify consumer awareness of a new and emerging brand or transform their perceptions of an existing brand, re-affirming its central place in their lives.
- Spreadability may expand the range of potential markets for a brand by introducing it, at low costs and low risks, to niches that previously were not part of it market.
- Spreadability may intensify consumer loyalty by increasing emotional attachment to the brand or media franchise.
- Spreadability may expand the shelf life of existing media content by creating new ways of interacting with it and it may even rebuild or reshape the market for a dormant brand.

In the short run, companies need to be clear on which model they are using and why. Where companies want to distribute messages which are targeted at the general population and which are time sensitive in nature, broadcast-based models of distribution are difficult to beat. Business models are still emerging around the distribution of spreadable media content, with the primary ones currently involving advertising support, subscriptions, or direct payment. In the short run, companies are apt to embrace hybrid strategies, relying on broadcast and stickiness models for some purposes, experimenting with spreadable media for specific purposes or audiences. Those companies which remain completely locked down will increasingly find it difficult to reach digitally-connected younger consumers who want to be able to take the media they want where they want it.
Definitions of ‘viral’ media suffer from being both too limiting and too all–encompassing. The term has ‘viral’ has been used to describe so many related but ultimately distinct practices — ranging from Word–of–Mouth marketing to video mash–ups and remixes posted to YouTube — that just what counts as viral is unclear. It is invoked in discussions about buzz marketing and building brand recognition while also popping up in discussions about guerilla marketing, exploiting social networks, and mobilizing consumers and distributors. Needless, the concept of viral distribution is useful for understanding the emergence of a spreadable media landscape. Ultimately, however, viral media is a flawed way to think about distributing content through informal or ad–hoc networks of consumers.

In this section, we will explore the roots of the concept of viral media, looking at the concept of the “media viruses” and its ties to the theory of the “meme”. The reliance on a potent biological metaphor to describe the process of communication reflects a particular set of assumptions about the power relations between producers, texts, and consumers which may obscure the realities these terms seek to explain. The metaphor of “infection” reduces consumers to the involuntary “hosts” of media viruses, while holding onto the idea that media producers can design “killer” texts which can ensure circulation by being injected directly into the cultural “bloodstream.” While attractive, such a notion doesn’t reflect the complexity of cultural and communicative processes. A continued dependency on terms based in biological phenomena dramatically limits our ability
to adequately describe viral (media?) as a complex system of social, technological, textual, and economic practices and relations.

In the following, we will outline the limits of these two analogies as part of making the case for the importance of adopting a new model for thinking about the grassroots circulation of content in the current media landscape. In the end, we are going to propose that these concepts be retired in favor of a new framework — Spreadable Media.

But first, onward to the laboratory!