

# When viral becomes virus

 By Dylan Balkind

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This article is rated 13 and may contain sections of strong language and violence. Reader's discretion is advised.

It takes generational armies of talented writers, designers, skilled strategists and hungry researchers to build a brand - and one hasty idiot and their internet connection with the capacity to destroy it. You know the type. Never an original thought to be proud of. David Icke celebrators. The lights are on but no one's home. And when they're not reveling in those daredevil antics of Crater and Escarpment Forrester - or changing the world one Candy Crush invite at a time - they'll add to the incessant noise online with 'likes' and 'shares' for everything. Yes. Everything.

## Viral anti-marketing

Viral marketing is a means of creating brand awareness by using the internet, email and social networks to spread a message to a mass audience. According to the Harvard Business Review, the minimum amount of replication for viral marketing classification is 1. That means that I've gone viral, you've gone viral, and that bonehead who woke up this morning to share three-year-old news... well yes... he too has gone viral.

What does this mean for brands when the news is negative, even if inaccurate? Like an undetectable, dormant virus, these delays mean that PR practitioners (and social media managers) are in a constant state of war. They have to be ready to Band Aid recurring wounds. All. The. Time.

## Exhibit A



What's happening here? Hundreds of cats - seized from a hoarding case - were shuttled to the University of Florida Veterinary College to be spayed, neutered, tested and treated for adoption. Each of them was under anaesthetic for expedient operation in this emergency situation<sup>[1]</sup>. The significance of context is significant. Something many didn't care for when they tweeted the image with the [#animalrights](#) hashtag. Naturally, it went viral and the goodwill was lost via the global gossip gauntlet. Exposé: Viral becomes virus.

These escapist-enthusiasts have such confident brevity at their keyboards, though they're not as 'with it' as others. Like Exhibit B: The Heineken Dog Fight.



What's happening here? A nightclub venue in Cambodia was used on one date as, well, a nightclub, and on another by a dogfighting ring. Heineken International is a group which owns a worldwide portfolio of over 170 beer brands and banked a €18.4bn revenue in 2012. It makes perfect sense then that they would put their team of internationally experienced marketers to use sponsoring dogfighting, doesn't it?

The significance of context is significant. Something many didn't care for when they tweeted the image calling it Heineken's big mistake and imploring people to 'share the hell out of it'. Naturally, it went viral and the truth was lost via the global gossip gauntlet. Exposé: Viral becomes virus.

## Inspection is better than cure

Media consultant, content development specialist and community manager, [Cath Jenkin](#) presses the importance of fact checking when posting information to your social networks. "A simple Google search or a look over at sites like Snopes.com will save you potential embarrassment," she says. A timeline would be a good start. The Heineken example first surfaced mid-April 2012, yet someone I know shared it this past weekend - two years later. Over and above one swifty whose regurgitations are clogging my timeline, what does it mean for the brands that have to consider other 'newcomers' to this 'news'?

"I see it a lot with these fake Facebook promo pages," Jenkin continues. "For example: 'Share and win an iPhone with us, because we can't sell them as they're out of their box!' Fake rubbish like this creates an extra burden on brands because

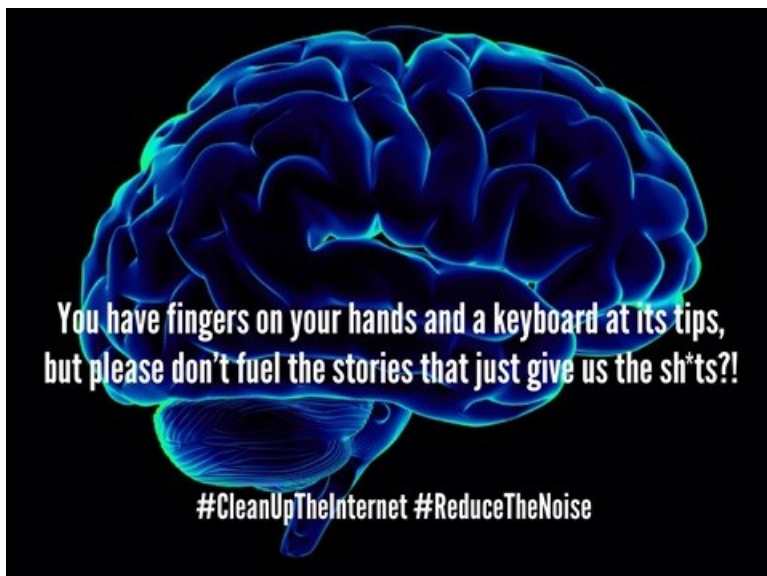
they end up having to defend their reputations over and over again. I feel for community managers who have to navigate this minefield!"

## Your lips are now your fingertips

Among its brilliance for access to information and each other, the internet also highlights how many insane people are not in asylums. So we have to expect the unexpected. Anybody with a thirst for gossip - these viral wannabes - is an anti-marketer. Everyone's a journalist and finding a 'story' doesn't involve time, talent or research. You just browse your Facebook news feed, repackage something that piqued your (lack of) interest and share it as your own. It breeds in the perfect environment for disease to do so and, exposé: Viral becomes virus.

As a teen, I'd always thought PR looked like an inspiring space to be in. Hats off to you guys! I don't have the ability to suffer fools - let alone entertain them. That comes with the combination of a) my winning personality, and b) my respect for how much hard work goes into making a brand what it is - at every level! My *you're a stupid idiot and not worth our time* statement wouldn't earn me a Silver Anvil, but hey - to what end? If it looks like a stupid and acts like a stupid, maybe it's time we start calling a stupid, stupid.

Ergo, my D&AD entry for Tactical Press Advertising would be this - a response to every conspiracy theorist and internet-commenting banshee out there.



Think I've got a shot?

Keep me posted - or don't - [@DylanBalkind](#).

[1] You can learn more about the role of animal research in advancing human and veterinary medicine - and the threat posed to this progress by the animal rights lobby - by following [Speaking of Research](#) on Facebook.

## ABOUT DYLAN BALKIND

Even the person who can sell ice to Eskimos needs have a way of letting the world know. Words. They're wonderful warriors with the potential for worry. Use a writer who takes his passion seriously. Here's more about me and mine: <http://goo.gl/68Rsse> | Twitter [@DylanBalkind](#)

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