ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s, Internet communications technologies have influenced human activity. Over the last 15 years, a phenomenon called virality—i.e., when content circulates via Internet among an increasingly broad audience at an exponentially rapid rate—has been especially impactful. Only some information achieves virality, so the phenomenon invites reflection. Yet, scholars have failed to adequately address the topic. The literature is especially sparse when it comes to viral artwork. This essay helps fill that gap in the literature by demonstrating the academic significance of viral artwork through comparative analysis of three cases where Internet-based artworks went viral: “Ten Hours of Princess Leia walking in NYC,” “New Beginnings,” and “McKayla is Not Impressed.” The author asserts that viral artwork merits rigorous study because doing so could: first, augment existing research on other topics; second, fortify investigations in philosophy of art; and third, guide the public toward better-informed engagement with viral artwork.

Keywords: Artwork, Globalization, Internet Communications Technologies, Philosophy of Art, Viral, Virality

INTRODUCTION

The artworld is transitioning to a digital environment where artists present cutting-edge forms of artwork in Internet spaces. High-level technology entrepreneurs have taken this claim to the next level by asserting that “software is eating the world” (Andressen, 2011, p.1; O’Hanihan, 2013, p.1). From this altered artworld environment emerges virality, a new phenomenon where information circulates via Internet among an increasingly broad—often global—audience at an exponentially rapid rate. The contrast between virality and virulence is sometimes lost in ordinary discussion. Since drawing this distinction outright could help sharpen the concepts for future analyses, I will do so. Describing something as virulent attributes to it severe, often harmful, effects. For example, virulent diseases are regarded as infective. The term can also be used to describe cases of bitter hostility, as in the sentence, “It was a virulent attack on feminism.” On the other hand, going viral is a matter of speed and spread. Though viral information could be virulent, it need not be. In fact, most often the opposite is true.

DOI: 10.4018/IJT.2015070106
Only some information achieves virality, so the phenomenon invites reflection. Yet, scholars have failed to adequately address the topic. The literature is especially sparse when it comes to viral artwork. This gap in the literature should not be taken as indication that investigating viral artwork would be fruitless. In fact, pursuing the topic could yield expansive results. The purpose of this essay is to help fill that gap in the literature by demonstrating the academic significance of viral artwork via comparative analysis of three cases where internet-based artworks went viral. Drawing from related research on Internet communications, I will argue for the claim that viral artwork merits rigorous study, given at least the following three reasons. First, rigorous study of viral artwork can augment existing research on other topics. Second, studying viral artwork can fortify investigations in philosophy of art by relating them to the online artworld. Third, scholars could outline aesthetic principles to guide public engagement with viral artwork, thus helping audiences take better-informed looks at the online artworld.

In what follows, I review existing contributions to the academic literature on topics related to viral artwork, namely: Internet communications technology; market research; net-art; and online community development. Also, I point out examples of academic and non-academic investigations that address viral artwork. Furthermore, I suggest that academics have neglected a valuable subject of study. To test my hypothesis that viral artwork merits rigorous study, I analyze three cases of Internet-based artwork that went viral: “Ten Hours of Princess Leia walking in NYC,” “New Beginnings,” and “McKayla is Not Impressed.” These examples guide my conclusion that rigorously studying viral artwork could: first, augment existing research on other topics; second, fortify investigations in philosophy of art; and third, guide the public toward better-informed engagement with viral artwork.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic Research Related to Viral Artwork

Scholars have made significant contributions to research on topics related to viral artwork. Take, for example, the subject of Internet communications technology regulation. John Palfrey (2010, 987) has argued that state-sponsored control over the technology is not specific to authoritarian regimes. Liu Yangyue (2014, pp. 801-803) has contributed to the dialogue by analyzing the differences in how authoritarian governments policies extend to the Internet, particularly those in Malaysia. Others have studied how citizens living in non-democratic nations have used Internet communications technology to assemble a revolution. For example, Jason Abbott has shed light on the Internet’s broad socio-political impact among citizens of many nations, especially within nations ruled by authoritarian governments. Abbott has argued that social media outlets are unique means for citizens to establish a public sphere, rather than mere communications tools (Abbott, 2012, p. 334). From that, he has asserted that Internet communications technologies make political revolution conceivable (Abbott, 2012, p. 334).

Still others have addressed how Internet communications technologies can be used for non-democratic efforts; just as people can use social media to organize an uprising, they can also use it to restrict others. For instance, Ian Bremmer has argued that there is nothing inherently democratic about the Internet because it amplifies a variety of perspectives, some of which are at odds with democratic ideals (Bremmer, 2010, p. 92). Additional research has been done on the availability of Internet communications technologies across the globe. Aurore J. Kamssu, Jeffrey S. Siekpe, and James A. Ellzy have claimed that since fewer interconnected computers are available in certain—often poorer—countries, those countries use the Internet less (Kamssu, Siekpe, Ellzy, 2004, pp. 161-166).
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