Dark social and the abyss

By Elena Protulis   18 Sep 2018

Every Wednesday evening (SAST), *@AdWeek* host a Twitter chat on various topics. The topics are insightful, relevant and it's always great as a marketer in the southern hemisphere to engage with like-minded counterparts in the northern hemisphere. Not that we should abide by what the north does, but we need to ensure we keep updated with what global brands are doing. And where do clients often look to for best practice examples? Mostly global. (Isn't that the thrill of using a global agency, you get to 'leverage' the knowledge base of the international offices in New York).

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Recently #AdWeekChat hosted a Twitter chat on viral video content, and where it stems from. The question was as follows:

Viral video used to be synonymous with YouTube hits. Then came Vine, Twitter videos, Instagram, and of course Facebook is a juggernaut. Where would you say you first see most viral videos now? Has it changed the kind of clips that blow up? #AdWeekChat

Viral content stems from dark social

My immediate response was that viral content stems from dark social, the place where you send to your tight network. It's content that's controversial, inspiring, entertaining and not necessarily what you want to be sharing in the broad daylight of your traditional social media channels. Dark social is an interesting space because it's through messenger apps, places where nobody can track the metrics involved through shareability, engagement, reach and sentiment.

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Jessica Tennant 20 Nov 2017

The place I see video content first is through WhatsApp. It's the first social media app I open and it's where groups are created to ensure everyone is kept updated with everything, all the time. The viral type of content shared, will eventually find its way to Facebook timelines, YouTube and Twitter, but the space it's initially shared is most often through this black hole, the untraceable abyss of dark social media.

[TrendTalk] Illuminating dark social

Louise Marsland 26 Jan 2015

AdWeek's response to this, was that WhatsApp isn't much of a player in the US, and neither are other messaging apps when it comes to sharing content. Why in countries like South Africa and China do instant messaging apps prevail? Perhaps because of past social unrest and sensitivities. According to [Statista](#), in South Africa, 49% of the population use WhatsApp, which has over 1.5 billion users globally.

The term "dark social" was first coined by Alexis C. Madrigal, a senior editor at *The Atlantic*, in a [2012 article](#), in response to stats that revealed that 56.5% of *The Atlantic's* website traffic came from dark sources, traffic that doesn't seem to have a specific source.

Dark social growing twice as fast as Facebook

Dark social is more prevalent than ever, with WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger growing about twice as fast as Facebook. And with that, a marketer and agency nightmare, the usual referrals and KPIs cannot be measured. It's not just about branded content, but also content that users create and share, which is often the content that becomes viral. Think Adam Catzavelos and his display of the beaches in Greece – that content initiated in WhatsApp, his 'private space' which ultimately bubbled to the surface and became viral, but also continued to get shared through dark social.

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24 Aug 2018

When it comes to brands, Nike's latest campaign for its 30th anniversary of 'Just Do It' has also gone dark social. Featuring Colin Kaepernick, the former San Francisco 49ers Quarterback, who sparked controversy by kneeling during the national anthem to protest racial injustice, the campaign was launched by seeding images on Twitter, which people screenshot and sent through dark social, which Nike can't track.

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Brands may have tracking codes in place, or shareability buttons to see which channel a user has gone to, but once the content launches into the abyss of dark social, there's no pixel, tag or sentiment that can be tracked. That's the nature of private messaging, it enables users to have a closed conversation. The challenge is for brands to harness dark social in a clever way.

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