

Through our newsfeeds and social media, we are constantly confronted with articles and headlines (like the headline of this piece) that have been deliberately designed to provoke outrage and attract clicks. We often naively think that by sharing our outrage on Facebook or Twitter, we are performing a small but good deed. However the collective effect of these small deeds often ends up exactly the opposite of what was intended.

Consider the Parisian nightclub Wanderlust. This summer they created public outrage by offering free shots to female clients in return for being able to take a Polaroid picture of their bare breasts, which they would then display behind the bar. Twitter user and “literary feminist” Anne\_GE broke the story, causing a heated exchange between those who were angered that the practice was demeaning to women and those who defended it as just a bit of innocent fun. Fueled by the uproar on Twitter, the story eventually appeared in major French and English speaking news outlets.

Wanderlust ultimately yielded to public pressure and stopped the practice, but the series of events was an overall monetary success for the nightclub. The story was viewed and shared thousands if not hundreds of thousands of times through social media, and for every activist who was put off by learning of the club’s crude behavior, they also likely picked up two or three new potential clients thanks to the name exposure generated through the social media war. It’s true that the feminists achieved the goal of stopping the practice, but in doing so, they created a much larger but undesirable side effect (in essentially financially rewarding Wanderlust in return for an unethical practice).

This story nicely illustrates how “outrage advertising” works. If you represent a brand (idea or political candidate) that is largely unknown or outside the mainstream, provoke outrage in a vocal group of people who tend to share things on social media, and get your advertising for free. For bonus bucks, set the stage so that the attitudes (or poor arguments) of the first group anger a second group, who also like to voice and share their opinions.

This is a well-known and exploited technique amongst professional marketers and advertisers (<http://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/marketing-age-outrage/1430904>). It likely works because people like to signal their moral identities and values, often in a superficially self-serving way, via the expression of moral outrage (<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11031-017-9601-2>). What we get upset about serves to communicate to others what we value most and who we are allied with. Thus it is little surprise that anger (which goes hand in hand with moral indignation of the type Anne\_GE experienced) is one of the most effective emotions in getting people to share their views/feelings with others over Twitter and Facebook (<http://jonahberger.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/ViralityB.pdf>).

Adding fuel to the fire, online publications make advertising money as a function of the number of clicks their articles produce. So whatever is likely to create anger and moral indignation is more likely to get picked up by the major news sources (than pieces not evoking extreme emotional responses) because that will have a higher chance of attracting clicks and thus revenue (<https://www.amazon.com/Trust-Me-Lying-Confessions-Manipulator/dp/1591846285>). Due to such reasons, The Economist recently argued that social media does not so much create divisions in society as it does amplify them (<https://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21730871-facebook-google-and-twitter-were-supposed-sa-ve-politics-good-information-drove-out>).

This unfortunate cocktail of media incentives and human psychology poses an interesting set of moral and practical questions. If you feel a sense of outrage at some behavior that you read about in the news, are you acting morally by spreading your outrage, and thereby rewarding the behavior you claim to be fighting against? Many people, including myself, think that American liberals collectively

contributed to the rise of Trump by (predictably) participating in the system of outrage advertising, thereby providing Trump with millions of dollars worth of free publicity. Perhaps the world would have been better off had we collectively not shared the newspaper reports of all his racist, sexist, xenophobic, etc... comments with our friends to show how anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-xenophobic (and generally awesome) we all are.

Similar concerns apply to protest. For example, Milo Yiannopolous, the now famous alt-right university campus troll was able to rise to fame largely thanks to consistent protests and displays of outrage on college campuses around the country. Newspaper and blog reports of outrage then spread virally through social media, either by liberals who were eager to show that they were also outraged at Yiannopolous' latest rant or by conservatives who were outraged at the liberals. If Yiannopolous had been talking to empty rooms and protestors had instead stayed home, he would not be the well-known commodity that he is now.

To be clear, the point here is not to say that protest and sharing of outrage are never useful or good things. For example, the same anger that helped spread Milo Yiannopolous' name may also have been a primary motivating factor in the recent sweeping electoral wins for American Democrats in state level races

(<http://time.com/5017525/the-resistance-helped-democrats-win-on-tuesday-now-theyre-turning-to-2018/>). It's a great motivator for action. It also seems plausible that outrage and indignation can promote sustained reasoning on a single topic over long spans of time. When you are angry about an outcome, you are perhaps more likely to put in sustained intellectual energy in figuring out a solution. So there are good reasons to think that there can be benefits as well as costs to outrage. My main point here is that there should be more careful thinking about when outrage based virtue signaling is likely to promote the agendas and causes people care about and when, instead, it is likely to do exactly the opposite.

Here are a few very preliminary rules of thumb:

1. Outrage benefits the unpopular or statistical minority. During the civil rights movement, racism and segregation were the dominant norm in society. By displaying outrage (and organizing around specific policy goals), minorities and liberals were able to generate cultural and legal change. On the other hand, when Trump was a largely unpopular choice for president, his views were not a dominant cultural or legal norm. By consistently displaying outrage, liberals unwittingly contributed to making him and new norms mainstream.
2. Outrage, while unlikely to convince new supporters to join your cause, likely does serve as excellent motivator to action for those who already agree with your cause (but who may not yet be active).
3. Who is outraged and who supports you matters. Consider the US-based Entertainment and Sports Programming Network's (ESPN) latest outrage event when its SportsCenter anchor publically called Trump a white supremacist on Twitter. This enraged a part of the American right, including Trump, and ESPN was forced to apologize. It is too early to know if the publicity from the story will benefit ESPN, but one important consideration here is that liberals do not tend to follow sports of the type that ESPN tends to cover (<http://www.newsday.com/entertainment/tv/study-determines-the-tv-shows-liberals-conservatives-watch-1.3934869>). So ESPN has infuriated their client base, and the possible clients they could motivate to watch their channel (i.e. liberals) are unlikely to pick up the slack by becoming loyal viewers.

I think each of these deserves careful thought at attention, and some of these rules of thumb may be misguided. At the very least I'd like to make a plea for more careful thinking about the cost and benefits sharing one's anger.