

Nieman Journalism Lab

Series: Lab Book Club: Viral culture

How viral culture is changing how we learn, share, create, and interact

By Ian Crouch / July 8 / 9 a.m.

[We're doing another Lab Book Club this week and next, on Bill Wasik's *And Then There's This*. Today, Ian Crouch summarizes and reviews the book's arguments; we'll have more excerpts from our interview with Wasik in the coming days. —Josh]

Bill Wasik's *And Then There's This: How Stories Live and Die in Viral Culture* deceptively slim book is packed with anecdotes, theories, and arguments about contemporary media culture. It's part memoir from Wasik, the merry prankster who created the [flash mob craze](#) in 2003. And it's part cultural inquiry, complete with clever social experiments and searing commentary.

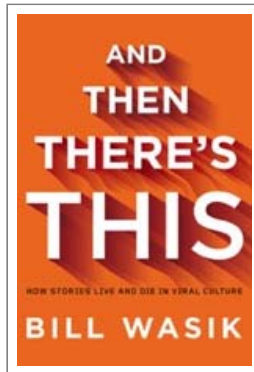
While Wasik admits he is often tempted "to lionize viral culture as a people-powered paradise," he thoroughly and persuasively argues that most of what we see, read, and discuss with one another is disposable by design, and ultimately corrosive. Let's consider some of Wasik's larger arguments.

The nanostory

Does the name [Blair Hornstine](#) ring a bell? Probably not, though that's fine with Wasik. He suspects that if you remember anything about her, it will be her brief notoriety as the "girl who sued to become valedictorian" of her graduating class in 2003. She had been forced to share the top spot with a classmate due to a technicality, and rather than graciously share the honor, she decided instead to take her case to federal court, where the judge awarded her sole rights to the position and a hefty chunk of cash in punitive damages. Hornstine's tale might have ended there, had the local paper she often wrote for not discovered that many of her stories contained extensive cases of plagiarism. [Harvard rescinded her acceptance](#) and talking heads rushed to label her emblematic of all that was wrong with America's success-obsessed youth.

Wasik uses this unsavory story to introduce a new term, the nanostory — the "media pileons that surge and die off within a matter of months, days, even hours." Once Hornstine became a big story — in major American newspapers and across cable and the Internet — she ceased to be a person, or even a name. She instead became a titillating and easily digestible modern fable, modern not only in its meaning but in its arc. All stories have a fixed lifespan, but the nanostory is so named both for its brief, bright existence and its false aura of social importance:

We allow ourselves to believe that a narrative is larger than itself, that it holds some portent for the long-term future; but soon enough we come to our senses, and the story, which cannot bear the weight of what we have heaped upon it, dies almost as suddenly as it emerged.



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Useful? Silly? [in reply to joeybaker 1 day ago](#)

@derekx No deal. I already have both of those things!

These stories get huge initial buzz, but then suffer from nearly simultaneous backlash — as if fame and backlash are not only inseparable but adjacent on a timeline. The stories and people involved are, writes Wasik, “gobbled up into the mechanical maw of the national conversation, masticated thoroughly, and spat out.” [Susan Boyle](#) was a nanostory. So was [Miss California](#). You’ll find a couple new ones on most news aggregators every day.

These are silly news stories that break big. But Wasik also argues that many nanostories are generated and promoted by the subjects themselves. Take [Amber Lee Ettinger](#), last fall’s Obama Girl, whose parlayed her role in the YouTube hit “[Crush on Obama](#)” into political commentator appearances on CNN and elsewhere. She recently [tossed out the first pitch](#) at the Brooklyn Cyclones’ Obama night.

Viral culture and the media mind

But you might argue that these bits of triviality have always been around. We’ve been distracting ourselves with gossip, nonsense, and superficial oddities for ages. What makes the nanostory different?

Wasik says the nanostory thrives today because we live in a viral culture. That culture labels ideas and stories as culturally significant almost instantaneously; it rewards shamelessness and confers attention for the briefest of moments. But Wasik admits that these same factors have been in place throughout the television age. The difference, he writes, is the audience. Wasik argues that people now operate with a collective media mind: that we are all savvy marketers of ourselves and eager to reward such initiative in others.

Having been sold culture for so many years, in so many sophisticated ways, consumers have now been handed the tools to sell themselves and they are doing so with great gusto.

Central to that self-marketing is access to data. Just as corporate marketers measure success and make predictions based on sophisticated analysis, so do individuals who put themselves out there online. Wasik argues that the ubiquity of user behavior data on sites such as [Technorati](#) and [Alexa](#) give individuals tools that once cost corporations millions. Not only can we monitor the performance of a blog post or uploaded video, but we can use data to predict what new content might make a poster famous.

And Wasik argues that fame seems more attainable than ever. Anyone posting on YouTube, Twitter, or Facebook is making a considered presentation of themselves to the world at large. They are acting out a role in the public sphere. And that act, Wasik argues, “changes what you say, how you act, how you see yourself.” Wasik never says it explicitly, but when he writes about the “hoardes of supposed naifs out there writing their blogs,” he is primarily talking about a certain demographic: the always-coveted 18-25s and 26-35s. In Wasik’s viral culture, these demographics are no longer just consumers of media and advertising; they’ve seized the means of cultural production as well. While it might be a democratic triumph to have the power to create media wrested away from a select group of culture makers, the new products created by that democracy leave Wasik dismayed.

The flash mob

Wasik knows firsthand about the allure of new media fame. He caused a stir in 2006 when he outed himself in Harper’s as the until-then anonymous architect of flash mobs, a social spectacle that hit New York in 2003 and spread around the globe — even seeping into the world of corporate advertising. Born out of what Wasik describes as a sort of existential boredom, the flash mob was a supposedly spontaneous assembly of people in a public place — a Claire’s accessory shop, the lobby of a Grand Hyatt — orchestrated beforehand by a series of email instructions. Wasik’s descriptions of these new media capers make for great reading — flash mob attendees wander through the rug department of Macy’s looking for the perfect “love rug,” or form a line blocks long ending at St. Patrick’s Cathedral, waiting for Strokes tickets that will never turn up. While another writer may have smugly observed the nonsense he had created, the strength of these tales comes from Wasik’s obvious bewilderment and dismay. How had he done this?

Again, Wasik argues that the prominence of his nanostory emerged from the Internet’s unique role as an archive of data and content. While television swamped us with stories, we had few ways to measure who cared about what. Now, as social networks and traffic monitors reveal popularity on a nearly minute-to-minute scale,

@derekw Willis already have both of those things.

Would pay for clandestine access to full-content RSS

feeds, though... [in reply to derekg 1 day ago](#)

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we are more susceptible than ever to herd behavior or the bandwagon effect. Wasik recalls watching with a mix of delight and horror as he transformed into the shrouded cult-figure “Bill,” venerated by the hoards newly at his disposal. The crowds grew as e-mails were forwarded on and on, and soon the conventional media began to take notice. Wasik did interviews with hundreds of media outlets, themselves eager to be seen reporting on the cutting-edge of culture.

Wasik was interviewed by scores of media outlets from around the world, but he singles out reporter [Amy Harmon](#) of The New York Times as particularly emblematic of the way that members of the traditional media approached the story. Harmon contacted Wasik (still anonymous at that point) by phone long after many other outlets had covered the story. Harmon said she knew the Times was late to the story but planned to devote prominent space in the [Week in Review](#) section identifying flash mobbing as a fascinating current trend. Instead, [Harmon's piece](#) focused on growing backlash against the mobs on the web. But Wasik writes that the backlash hadn't even happened yet — the Times was simply pushing this nanostory along to the next logical stop on its path to irrelevancy. The evidence marshaled by Harmon, Wasik writes, “hardly constituted a ‘backlash’ against this still-growing, intercontinental fad, but what I think Harmon and the Times rightly understood was that a backlash was the only avenue by which they could advance the story, i.e., find a new narrative.”

Wasik never makes clear whether he feels the Times story led to the backlash that followed, but eventually it did come, and the mobs were soon over. He notes that they could ultimately be unsustainable, since they were the very definition of a nanostory: they didn't mean anything, and soon people came to realize it.

But mobs live on. Wasik describes the surreal experience of attending a “flash mob” [for the Ford Fusion](#) at City Hall Plaza in Boston, orchestrated entirely by a marketing company. The event is a bust; it feels staged and obviously commercial. People walk by, disregarding the scene as the marketing stunt it clearly was. Like traditional media, which seemed both eager and clumsy while covering the story, corporate America had fallen for the gag but somehow missed the point.

Following his unnerving success with flash mobs, Wasik set out to perform a series of similar experiments in the new media world. Fascinated by the star-making power of the music-review site [Pitchfork](#) on the indie scene, Wasik attempts to destroy the Swedish band [Peter Bjorn and John](#) as they threaten to emerge at the 2007 SXSW festival. He starts the blog [“Stop Peter Bjorn and John”](#) and arranges a mock-protest. Within a week [EW.com](#) and Mother Jones, among others reported on growing backlash against the group. Soon this innocuous pop group had earned the label “controversial” on the [San Francisco Chronicle's culture blog](#). But not all his experiments build buzz: his [oppodepot.com](#), which attempted to aggregate dirt on all the 2008 Presidential candidates, attracted little traffic — because the site failed to take a partisan angle, Wasik says.

So what? Conclusions and ideas looking forward

What conclusions could one draw from reading Wasik describe — and experiment with — these new cultural products? Here are a few:

— *The Internet is a false cure for boredom.* Wasik says he began the flash mob project out of a sort of existential boredom; he admits he is often bored. The web, with its instant access to information and entertainment, is the ultimate place to “do something” without doing much at all, Wasik argues. He writes that the web has not eliminated our boredom, just distracted us from it.

— *Viral culture rewards narrow thinking.* Each of Wasik's social experiments was founded on a clearly defined meme, a narrow and finely executed idea. We see that blogs that tend to gain notoriety (or book deals) do [one thing really well](#), while blogs with wide focus often fall by the wayside. But serious writing or good political commentary thrive on complexity, exactly what viral culture rejects as too complicated.

— *Culture is infected with a virus.* He writes that a meme or nanostory is like an “independent agent loosed into the world, where it travels from mind to mind, burrowing into each, colonizing all as widely and ruthlessly as it can.” Wasik argues that these trivial items are choking us, blinding us, and making us both stupid and crazy.

— *Everything is a meme.* Though Wasik lumps both news items and self-promoted projects under the same “nanostory” or “meme” headings, it seems that these two categories are fundamentally different. He devotes too little energy to sorting out

who continues to control and disseminate information, and grants too much power to individuals and too little to still powerful media conglomerates and corporations.

— *Crowds are not as wise as they seem*. Wasik suggests that culture has devolved into a popularity contest, with news outlets mistaking clickthroughs, pageviews, and most-emailed lists for reliable indicators of quality and worth. He cites [a Columbia study](#) that found people tasked with downloading and evaluating music relied largely on the popularity of the songs among other respondents.

— *Nanostories are killing us*. In the book's final section, Wasik offers this rousing plea: "We want reason in our politics, greatness in our art, and we see that these are incompatible with our feckless, churning conversation. We must learn how to neuter our nanostories, or at least cut off their food supply." Viral culture, he seems to argue, is at perhaps permanent odds with seriousness and quality.

— *We might be doomed*. While there's much to agree with in Wasik's arguments, he offers us few specifics on how to "neuter" these viral stories. He mentions Jake Silverstein's idea of an [Internet Ramadan](#), during which participants go offline for a month, or Intel's flirtation with offline "[quiet time](#)" one morning a week. Rather than offer specifics, Wasik focuses on individual choices, the familiar idea of unplugging ourselves from the constant flow of information — or, more elegantly, that "we must become judicious controllers of our own contexts, making careful and self-reflective choices about what we read, watch, consume."

Wasik asks hard questions to which there are no simple answers. But if we are experiencing a moment of cultural catastrophe, shouldn't the remedies extend beyond such relatively simple, personal decisions? After all, we can only consume what the culture makes available. A constructive question going forward, it seems, might be: rather than simply cut ourselves off, can we use the apparatus of digital media to produce and enjoy *quality* content?

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