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## FEATURES

# Fueling Content in the Dark

Drake and Rihanna have both used “dark social” to fuel their success. Here’s what they can teach the rest of us.

I don’t have a serious case of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), but when one of my Instagram friends posted a screenshot from Drake’s new video, I needed to see it. Right away. And my hunt began. First, I went to YouTube. No dice. Where was it? I went back to where I started, and Drake’s Instagram indicated that the video was available on Apple Music. Instinctively, I shared the link with my WhatsApp group. The next day, “Hotline Bling” memes exploded online, and the video was all over my Facebook newsfeed. Everyone knew about it by then.

## The volume of dark social sharing is three times larger than all the sharing on Facebook.

### Not ALL sharing happens on Facebook

Because not all posts need to be broadcast. By broadcast, we mean to a larger group other than close friends and/or family. And Mark Zuckerberg knows that, thereby creating a “Family of Apps” to capture all kinds of interactions – one-to-one, one-to-few, one-to-many.

“Dark social” was first used in 2012 by Alexis C. Madrigal, then senior editor at The Atlantic, to describe a phenomenon he discovered by studying the deep link behavior among magazines’ website visitors. Madrigal found that less than half of the traffic to specific articles came from social sites, while the rest came from long, impossible-to-type links shared in ways that were not readily trackable. Research by RadiumOne found that 69% of all content is shared via dark social, and 32% of worldwide sharers do so only on dark. The volume of dark social sharing is three times larger than all the sharing on Facebook.

To understand dark social in a broader context, note that it includes sharing of any content via emails, instant messaging and platforms like WhatsApp or Tinder. Because using these platforms is so fast and easy, publishers have begun to incorporate Whatsapp buttons alongside those for Facebook and Twitter. It’s certainly easier than copying and pasting links. We know where consumers are. We just don’t know what exactly they’re talking about. We know the media touchpoints (where) but not the content (what).

### Everybody’s got a dark side

Facebook Jane is different from Tinder Jane. There’s a difference between content shared on dark vs light (broadcast social media) depending



on the persona assumed by the user. This was poignantly displayed in a project by Belgian artist Dries Depoorter. In an exhibit he named “Tinder In,” Depoorter juxtaposed LinkedIn and Tinder profile pictures to show how people choose to represent themselves on each platform. As you would expect, there was often a big difference between the two. This is because online social media spheres tend to mimic offline friendship/audience groups. The smaller the circle gets, the more people reveal. According to a The Total Youth Mobile Report, 92% of millennials will only share information on Snapchat with close friends. If we were to plot a typical millennial’s social media

mix, we would find that each channel serves a different purpose. Users cluster audiences based on their key intentions: “share to inform”, “share to involve” or “share to impress”.

### DARK CHANNELS are not about infrastructure but about user behaviour and its intended audience.

Say, Snapchat can be considered a narrower sharing medium compared to Facebook (not Facebook Messenger) but once a snap is posted for anyone – friends and/or strangers – to see, it becomes light (but then again, if it’s leaked without the intention of sharing it publicly, it might as well be a scandal).

### Content has shades

If we know that users share and consume content differently across media, we have an opportunity to differentiate our messages between light and dark too. Whilst not everything is meant to be broadcast, by combining dark social with a certain context produces different approaches on the channel. Some brands may want to create content for both light and dark channels. While generic messages for an energy drink can run on light broadcast social, for example, imagine how the product might be positioned on a dating app.



**Curated self:** Generic  
Public/open documentation  
Example: Bank preferences

**Promoted self:** Contextual  
Inspirational/entertaining  
Example: Investments

**Deeper self:** Personal  
Semi-private documentation  
Example: Debt management



Fully integrating dark social messaging with a light approach is always a good strategy. While Coca-Cola ran its “Naughty or Nice” campaign on Tinder last Christmas, it cast a wider net by highlighting the swiping activity on broader channels. Content should match the Channel for a stronger Connection. For Dark Media to be fully effective, we need to match it with the right content, not copy/paste the same asset across channels. By plotting different topics, we can better understand the nature of conversations surrounding them.

**Content as currency: Tribecasting and Narrowcasting**

“Tribecasting” is the art of stoking interest among a core group of fans early in the process. It involves giving followers bespoke content that is often raunchier or more honest than what eventually appears on mainstream media. By playing on people’s desire to be the first to know and share information – thereby using exclusive access to validate their informal ranking as the most connected-person in their networks – they’re driven to find out more. Dark social also provides an opportunity to create some exclusivity among dedicated followers. If you give your most passionate fans access to dark content, they will

share it with tastemakers and influencers before it goes mainstream.

In the olden days (about five years ago), discovering a new song was easy and convenient, because it was everywhere. Music releases were meant to build huge awareness. As a result, some believe the business made it too easy to take the actual product – the video – for granted. That was not the case with Drake’s video. There was nothing to be found, which made it obvious that I had to find it. But I didn’t want to just broadcast it on Facebook; I needed to be the one to share it among WhatsApp friends who are genuinely into Drake and his music. The result is that, when new music appears to explode out of nowhere, it’s often been brewing on dark social for some time.

Rihanna’s Samsung-sponsored launch of her new album and “Anti” world tour also triggered a social hunt. Both the artist and company dropped crumbs of clues before publishing the actual link that led fans to everything “Anti”. Drake’s and Rihanna’s campaigns both drove content discovery and advocacy, rather than massive awareness. Their fans carried the music to the mainstream, where – rather than going from 0 to 60 – consumers had already had their curiosity tweaked just a bit.

**What can be done in the dark?**

When marketers and their agencies come up with a “big idea”, perhaps we should regard the idea as the plot of a story that the media and consumers ultimately write. It’s a Content Creation and Distribution exercise. This means stretching the “connections” part of MediaCom’s Content + Connection positing to include both the content asset as well as new forms of dark social distribution, including:

**Creation**

- Content shading (light vs dark differentiation)
- Made-for-dark content
- Personalized messaging
- Text-based campaigns

**Distribution**

- Dark & light systems
- Link drops
- Exclusive content experiences
- First release channels
- Narrowcasting

**Not everything stays (in the) dark**

What was taboo yesterday could be acceptable today. Consequently, not all dark social topics stay on these platforms. As some sensitive topics approach critical mass, more and more related content gets published. Conversations about new topics then take place in the dark, and the process begins again. Media evolve with its users. Messaging platforms are growing and becoming one-stop shops or, in some cases, apps-in-one.

|                            |  |   |                       |
|----------------------------|--|---|-----------------------|
|                            | <i>Open</i>  |   |                       |
| <i>Sensitive interests</i> | <i>Sensitive but can be discussed in public</i>    | <i>Mainstream acceptable topics broadcast-appropriate</i> | <i>Safe interests</i> |
|                            | <i>Very sensitive Topics in closed discussions</i> | <i>Standard but would rather be kept personal</i>         |                       |
|                            | <i>Personal</i>                                    |   |                       |

Figure: Dark topics may not necessarily be sensitive but we need to consider the ones that people would keep personal while keeping in mind a cultural dimension.

In China, for example, WeChat accommodates messaging and booking, thereby minimizing the need for off-platform follow-up activity. Meanwhile, new apps have revived text. Quartz curates an ongoing conversation about the news, sort of like texting, and Hero allows users to make reservations via chat.

The truth is that people have an appetite for the taboo, and a lot of brands can use it to bolster their own fortunes.