

Fame and fate: Why is global success so unpredictable?

Principles of Complex Systems | @pocsvox
CSYS/MATH 300, Fall, 2017

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1 of 30

Outline

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4 of 30

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The most famous painting in the world:



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3 of 30

The dismal predictive powers of editors



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7 of 30

Twelve ...

The completely unpredicted fall of Eastern Europe:



Timur Kuran: [2] "Now Out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989"

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8 of 30

Reason 2—"We are all individuals."

Archival footage:

- Individual narratives are not enough to understand distributed, networked minds.

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11 of 30

We understand bushfire stories:

- Sparks start fires.
- System properties control a fire's spread.
- But we make two mistakes about Social Fires...

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9 of 30

Reason 3—We are spectacular imitators.

BBC/David Attenborough.

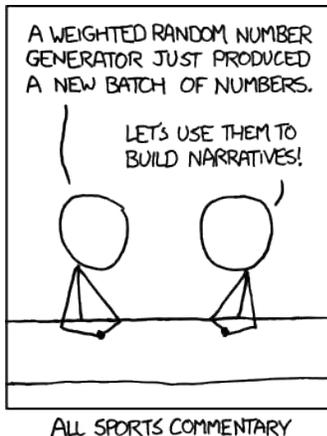
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12 of 30

Reason 1—We are Homo Narrativus.



<http://xkcd.com/904/>

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Mistake 1: Success is due to intrinsic properties

See "Becoming Mona Lisa" by David Sassoon

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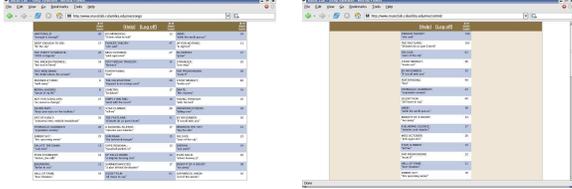
13 of 30



48 songs
30k participants

Exp 1— weak social

Exp. 2—strong social



"An experimental study of inequality and unpredictability in an artificial cultural market" [↗](#)
Salganik, Dodds, and Watts, Science, **311**, 854–856, 2006. [3]

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14 of 30

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15 of 30

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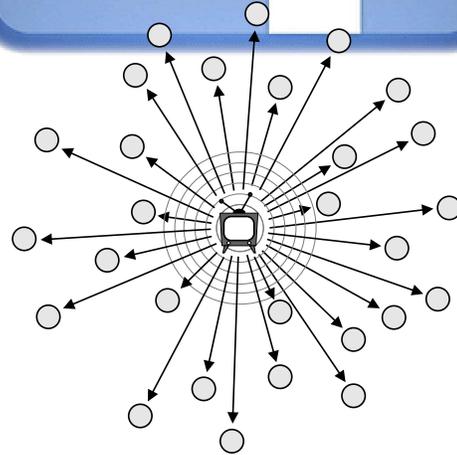


16 of 30

Mistake 2:
Seeing success is 'due to social' and
wanting to say 'all your interactions are
belong to us'



The hypodermic model of influence:



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17 of 30

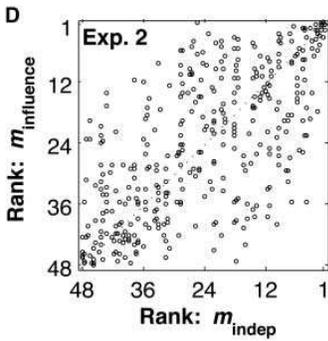
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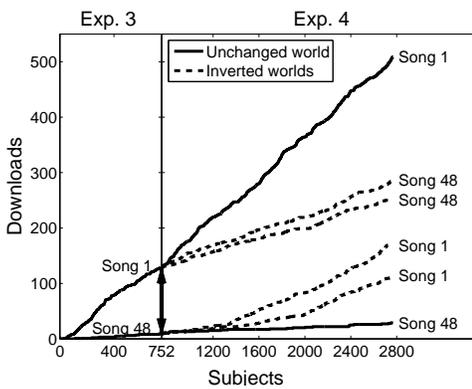
18 of 30

Resolving the paradox:

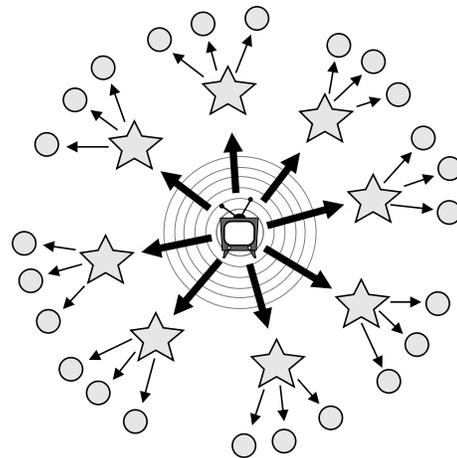


Increased social awareness leads to
Stronger inequality + Less predictability.

Payola/Deceptive advertising hurts us all:



The two step model of influence: [1]



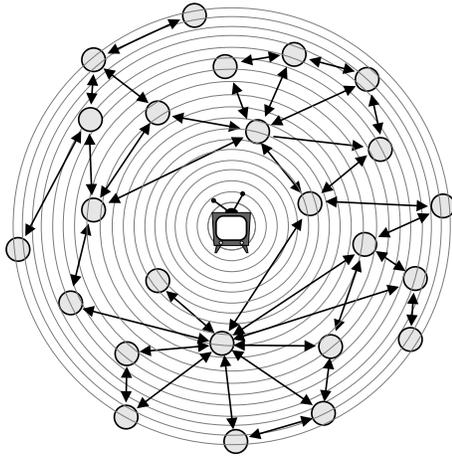
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19 of 30

The network model of influence:



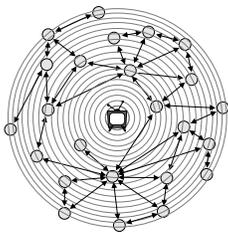
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20 of 30

The network model of influence:



How superspreading works:
Many interconnected, average, trusting people must benefit from both receiving and sharing a message far from its source.



"Influentials, Networks, and Public Opinion Formation"
Watts and Dodds,
J. Consum. Res., **34**, 441–458, 2007. [4]

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21 of 30

Things that spread quickly:



+ News ...

buzzfeed.com

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22 of 30

Etymological clarity:

- 🔗 **Fate**—from the Latin *fatus*: meaning “spoken”.
- 🔗 Fate is talk that has been done. “It is written”, fore-tell, pre-dict.
- 🔗 “There is no such thing as fate, only the story of fate.”
- 🔗 Destiny is probabilistic.
- 🔗 **Fame**—from the Latin *fāma*: meaning “to talk.”
- 🔗 Fame is inherently the social discussion about the thing, not the thing itself.
- 🔗 **Renown**: Repeatedly named, talked about. Old French *renon*, from *re-* + *non* (“name”).
- 🔗 **Réclame**. “Clamo”—Proto-Indo-European: “to shout” (again). Connected to “lowing”.

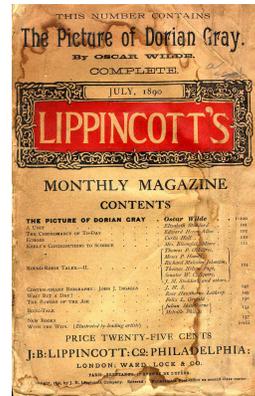
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Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray



“There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.”

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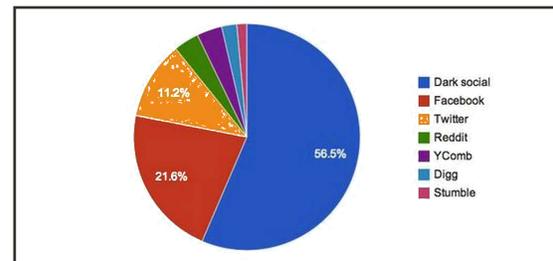
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24 of 30

Spreading in the social wild:

The Dark Social Web



Dark Social: We Have the Whole History of the Web Wrong [The Atlantic]

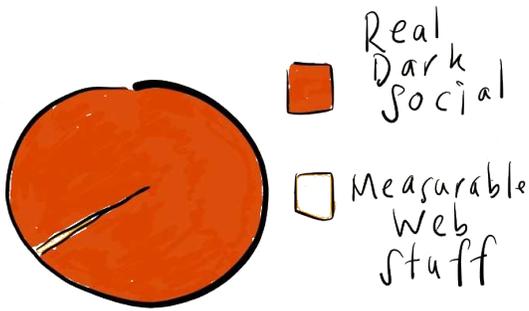
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A completely made up pie chart:



How to make things spread (maybe):

Shareworthy Content is King:

1. Build entities/messages/stories that have intrinsic and social value out in the **Social Wild**.
2. Advertise but lay off the social interactions.
3. Just keep trying.

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27 of 30

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28 of 30

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World Politics, 44:7–48, 1991. [pdf](#)
- [3] M. J. Salganik, P. S. Dodds, and D. J. Watts.
An experimental study of inequality and unpredictability in an artificial cultural market.
Science, 311:854–856, 2006. [pdf](#)

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- [4] D. J. Watts and P. S. Dodds.
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[pdf](#)

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29 of 30

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References



30 of 30