

# Fame and fate: Why is global success so unpredictable?

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Principles of Complex Systems, Vol. 1 | @pocsvox  
CSYS/MATH 300, Fall, 2020

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## Outline

Superstars

Superspreading

References

## The most famous painting in the world:



PoCS, Vol. 1  
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Fame and fate:  
Why is global  
success so  
unpredictable?

Superstars  
Superspreading  
References

1 of 28

PoCS, Vol. 1  
@pocsvox  
Fame and fate:  
Why is global  
success so  
unpredictable?

Superstars  
Superspreading  
References

2 of 28

PoCS, Vol. 1  
@pocsvox  
Fame and fate:  
Why is global  
success so  
unpredictable?

Superstars  
Superspreading  
References

4 of 28

## The dismal predictive powers of editors .....



PoCS, Vol. 1  
@pocsvox  
Fame and fate:  
Why is global  
success so  
unpredictable?

Superstars  
Superspreading  
References

5 of 28

PoCS, Vol. 1  
@pocsvox  
Fame and fate:  
Why is global  
success so  
unpredictable?

Superstars  
Superspreading  
References

6 of 28

PoCS, Vol. 1  
@pocsvox  
Fame and fate:  
Why is global  
success so  
unpredictable?

Superstars  
Superspreading  
References

7 of 28

## Twelve ...

## The completely unpredicted fall of Eastern Europe:



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

## We understand bushfire stories:

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

4 of 28

## Reason 1—We are Homo Narrativus.



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

## Reason 2—"We are all individuals."

### Archival footage:

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

## Reason 3—We are spectacular imitators.

BBC/David Attenborough.

PoCS, Vol. 1  
@pocsvox  
Fame and fate:  
Why is global  
success so  
unpredictable?

Superstars  
Superspreading  
References

8 of 28

PoCS, Vol. 1  
@pocsvox  
Fame and fate:  
Why is global  
success so  
unpredictable?

Superstars  
Superspreading  
References

9 of 28

PoCS, Vol. 1  
@pocsvox  
Fame and fate:  
Why is global  
success so  
unpredictable?

Superstars  
Superspreading  
References

10 of 28

Mistake 1:  
Success is due to intrinsic properties

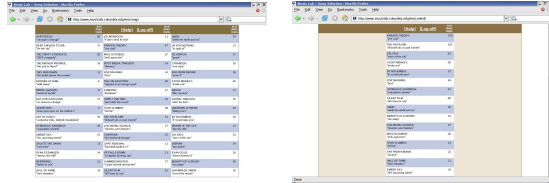
See "Becoming Mona Lisa" by David Sassoon



48 songs  
30k participants

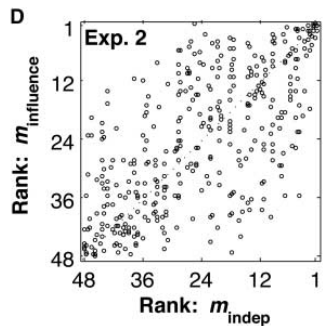
Exp 1— weak social

Exp. 2—strong social



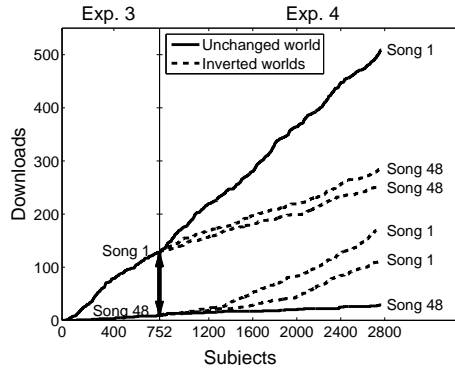
"An experimental study of inequality and unpredictability in an artificial cultural market"  
Salganik, Dodds, and Watts, Science, 311, 854-856, 2006. [3]

Resolving the paradox:



Increased social awareness leads to  
Stronger inequality + Less predictability.

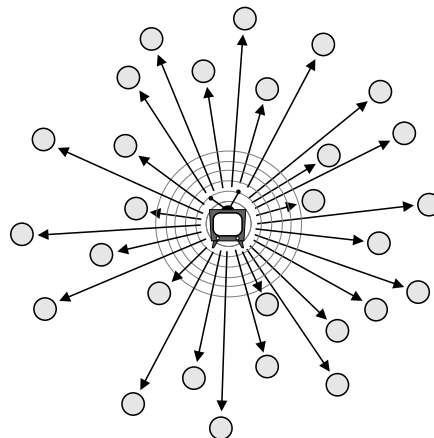
Payola/Deceptive advertising hurts us all:



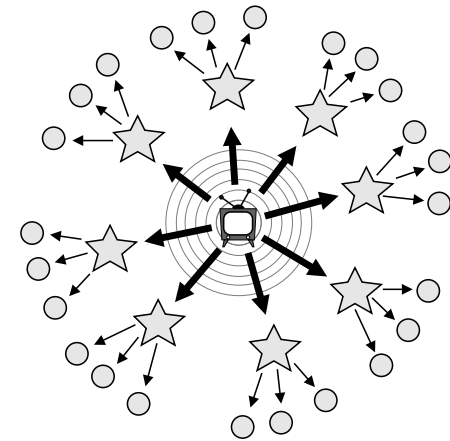
Mistake 2:  
Seeing success is 'due to social' and  
wanting to say 'all your interactions are  
belong to us'



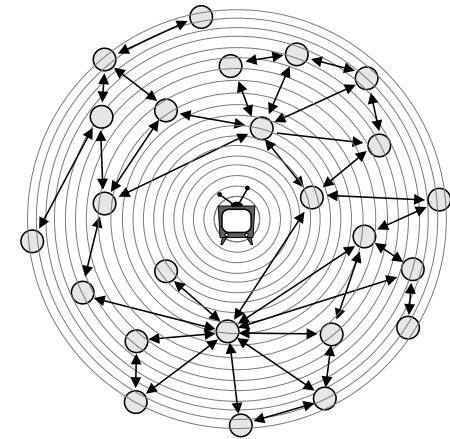
The hypodermic model of influence:



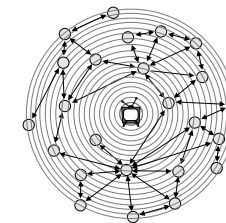
The two step model of influence: [1]



The network model of influence:



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]

PoCS, Vol. 1  
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Fame and fate:  
Why is global  
success so  
unpredictable?

Superstars  
Superspreading  
References

11 of 28

PoCS, Vol. 1  
@pocsvox  
Fame and fate:  
Why is global  
success so  
unpredictable?

Superstars  
Superspreading  
References

12 of 28

PoCS, Vol. 1  
@pocsvox  
Fame and fate:  
Why is global  
success so  
unpredictable?

Superstars  
Superspreading  
References

13 of 28

PoCS, Vol. 1  
@pocsvox  
Fame and fate:  
Why is global  
success so  
unpredictable?

Superstars  
Superspreading  
References

14 of 28

PoCS, Vol. 1  
@pocsvox  
Fame and fate:  
Why is global  
success so  
unpredictable?

Superstars  
Superspreading  
References

15 of 28

PoCS, Vol. 1  
@pocsvox  
Fame and fate:  
Why is global  
success so  
unpredictable?

Superstars  
Superspreading  
References

16 of 28

PoCS, Vol. 1  
@pocsvox  
Fame and fate:  
Why is global  
success so  
unpredictable?

Superstars  
Superspreading  
References

17 of 28

PoCS, Vol. 1  
@pocsvox  
Fame and fate:  
Why is global  
success so  
unpredictable?

Superstars  
Superspreading  
References

18 of 28

PoCS, Vol. 1  
@pocsvox  
Fame and fate:  
Why is global  
success so  
unpredictable?

Superstars  
Superspreading  
References

19 of 28

## Things that spread quickly:



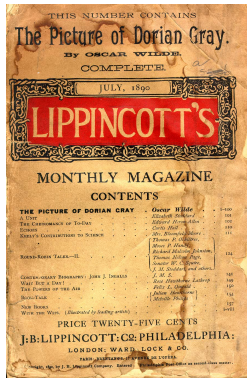
## + News ...

[buzzfeed.com](http://buzzfeed.com)

## 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”.

## 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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Fame and fate:  
Why is global  
success so  
unpredictable?

Superstars  
Superspreading  
References

20 of 28

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@pocsvox  
Fame and fate:  
Why is global  
success so  
unpredictable?

Superstars  
Superspreading  
References

21 of 28

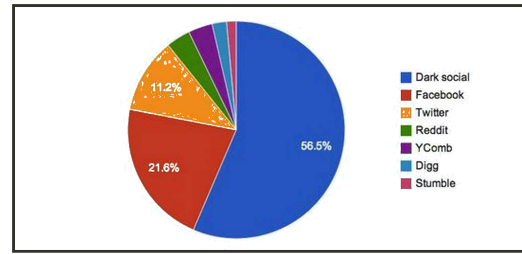
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@pocsvox  
Fame and fate:  
Why is global  
success so  
unpredictable?

Superstars  
Superspreading  
References

22 of 28

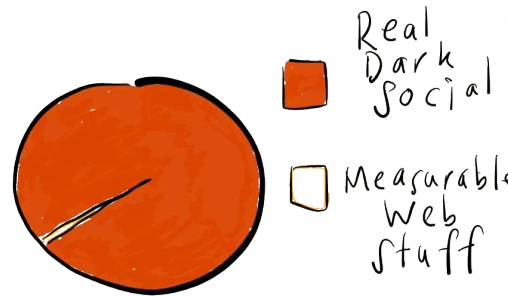
## Spreading in the social wild:

### The Dark Social Web



“The only real way to optimize for social spread is in the nature of the content itself. There’s no way to game email or people’s instant messages. There’s no power users you can contact. There’s no algorithms to understand. This is pure social, uncut.”

Dark Social: We Have the Whole History of the  
A completely made up pie chart:



## How to make things spread (maybe):

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Fame and fate:  
Why is global  
success so  
unpredictable?

Superstars  
Superspreading  
References

23 of 28

PoCS, Vol. 1  
@pocsvox  
Fame and fate:  
Why is global  
success so  
unpredictable?

Superstars  
Superspreading  
References

24 of 28

PoCS, Vol. 1  
@pocsvox  
Fame and fate:  
Why is global  
success so  
unpredictable?

Superstars  
Superspreading  
References

25 of 28

## Shareworthy Content is King:

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

## References I

- E. Katz and P. F. Lazarsfeld. **Personal Influence.** The Free Press, New York, 1955.
- T. Kuran. Now out of never: The element of surprise in the east european revolution of 1989. *World Politics*, 44:7–48, 1991. pdf
- 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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PoCS, Vol. 1  
@pocsvox  
Fame and fate:  
Why is global  
success so  
unpredictable?

Superstars  
Superspreading  
References

26 of 28

PoCS, Vol. 1  
@pocsvox  
Fame and fate:  
Why is global  
success so  
unpredictable?

Superstars  
Superspreading  
References

27 of 28

PoCS, Vol. 1  
@pocsvox  
Fame and fate:  
Why is global  
success so  
unpredictable?

Superstars  
Superspreading  
References

28 of 28