

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

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Principles of Complex Systems, Vols. 1 & 2  
CSYS/MATH 300 and 303, 2021-2022 | @pocsvox

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Computational Story Lab | Vermont Complex Systems Center  
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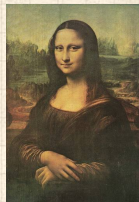
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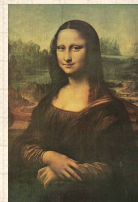


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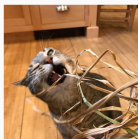
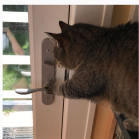
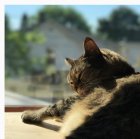
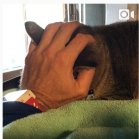
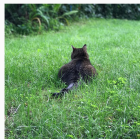
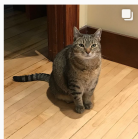
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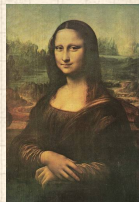




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 On Instagram at [pratchett\\_the\\_cat](https://www.instagram.com/pratchett_the_cat) 

# Outline

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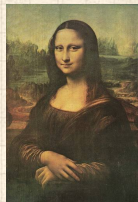
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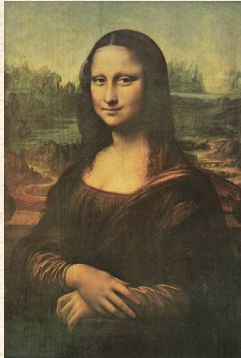
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# The most famous painting in the world:



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

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Twelve ...

# The completely unpredicted fall of Eastern Europe:



Timur Kuran: <sup>[3]</sup> "Now Out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989"

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# We understand bushfire stories:



1. Sparks start fires.

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# We understand bushfire stories:



1. Sparks start fires.
2. System properties control a fire's spread.

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# 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**...

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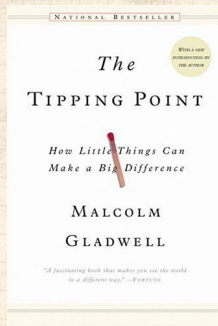
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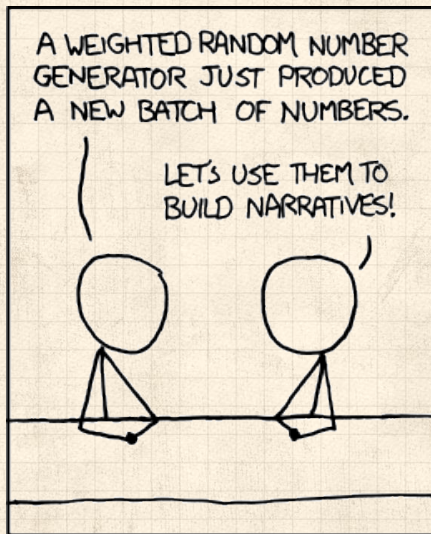
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1. Sparks start fires.
2. System properties control a fire's spread.
3. But we make two mistakes about **Social Fires**...



# Reason 1—We are Homo Narrativus.



ALL SPORTS COMMENTARY

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## Reason 2—"We are all individuals."

Archival footage:

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



## Reason 3—We are spectacular imitators.

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BBC/David Attenborough.

# Mistake 1: Success is due to intrinsic properties



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See "Becoming Mona Lisa" by David Sassoon [↗](#)



# Mistake 1: Success is due to intrinsic properties



it's just so disappointingly small

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See "Becoming Mona Lisa" by David Sassoon 

# Mistake 1: Success is due to intrinsic properties



Stolen in 1913, recovered in 1915.

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See "Becoming Mona Lisa" by David Sassoon [↗](#)

# Mistake 1: Success is due to intrinsic properties



Hidden during WWII.

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See "Becoming Mona Lisa" by David Sassoon [↗](#)

# Mistake 1: Success is due to intrinsic properties



Repeatedly vandalised and attacked. [↗](#)

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See "Becoming Mona Lisa" by David Sassoon [↗](#)



48 songs  
30k participants

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## Exp 1— weak social

	Final Score	Title	Artist	Final Score	Final Rank
1	20	LET ME KNOW "Through it all together"	10	10	34
2	17	DEEP END OF THE "You're the best"	17	17	24
3	16	THE WINDY SPARKS "You're the best"	16	16	27
4	15	THE BROTHERS "You're the best"	15	15	28
5	14	THE BROTHERS "You're the best"	14	14	29
6	13	THE BROTHERS "You're the best"	13	13	30
7	12	THE BROTHERS "You're the best"	12	12	31
8	11	THE BROTHERS "You're the best"	11	11	32
9	10	THE BROTHERS "You're the best"	10	10	33
10	9	THE BROTHERS "You're the best"	9	9	35
11	8	THE BROTHERS "You're the best"	8	8	36
12	7	THE BROTHERS "You're the best"	7	7	37
13	6	THE BROTHERS "You're the best"	6	6	38
14	5	THE BROTHERS "You're the best"	5	5	39
15	4	THE BROTHERS "You're the best"	4	4	40
16	3	THE BROTHERS "You're the best"	3	3	41
17	2	THE BROTHERS "You're the best"	2	2	42
18	1	THE BROTHERS "You're the best"	1	1	43
19	0	THE BROTHERS "You're the best"	0	0	44
20	0	THE BROTHERS "You're the best"	0	0	45
21	0	THE BROTHERS "You're the best"	0	0	46
22	0	THE BROTHERS "You're the best"	0	0	47
23	0	THE BROTHERS "You're the best"	0	0	48

## Exp. 2—strong social

	Final Score	Title	Artist	Final Score	Final Rank
1	20	LET ME KNOW "Through it all together"	10	10	34
2	17	DEEP END OF THE "You're the best"	17	17	24
3	16	THE WINDY SPARKS "You're the best"	16	16	27
4	15	THE BROTHERS "You're the best"	15	15	28
5	14	THE BROTHERS "You're the best"	14	14	29
6	13	THE BROTHERS "You're the best"	13	13	30
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16	3	THE BROTHERS "You're the best"	3	3	41
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18	1	THE BROTHERS "You're the best"	1	1	43
19	0	THE BROTHERS "You're the best"	0	0	44
20	0	THE BROTHERS "You're the best"	0	0	45
21	0	THE BROTHERS "You're the best"	0	0	46
22	0	THE BROTHERS "You're the best"	0	0	47
23	0	THE BROTHERS "You're the best"	0	0	48

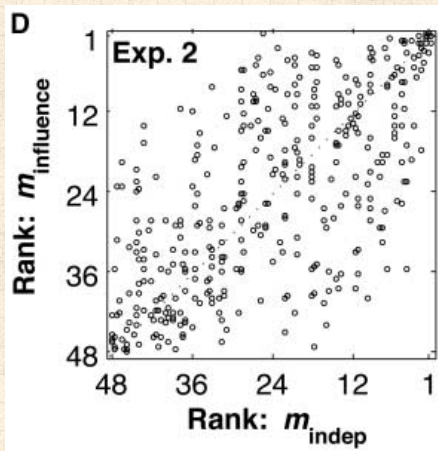


"An experimental study of inequality and unpredictability in an artificial cultural market" ↗

Salganik, Dodds, and Watts,  
Science, **311**, 854–856, 2006. <sup>[4]</sup>



# Resolving the paradox:



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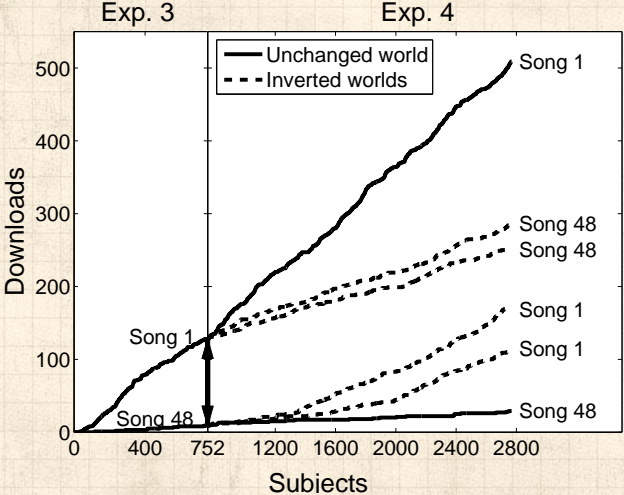


Increased social awareness leads to  
Stronger inequality + Less predictability.

# Payola/Deceptive advertising hurts us all:

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## Mistake 2:

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

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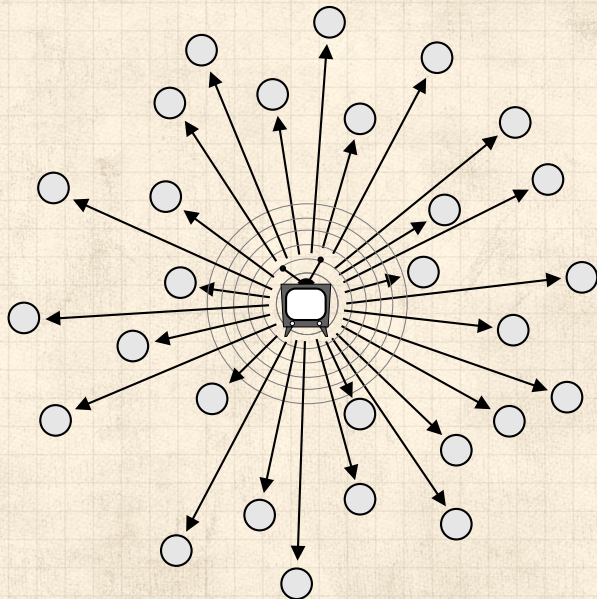
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# The hypodermic model of influence:



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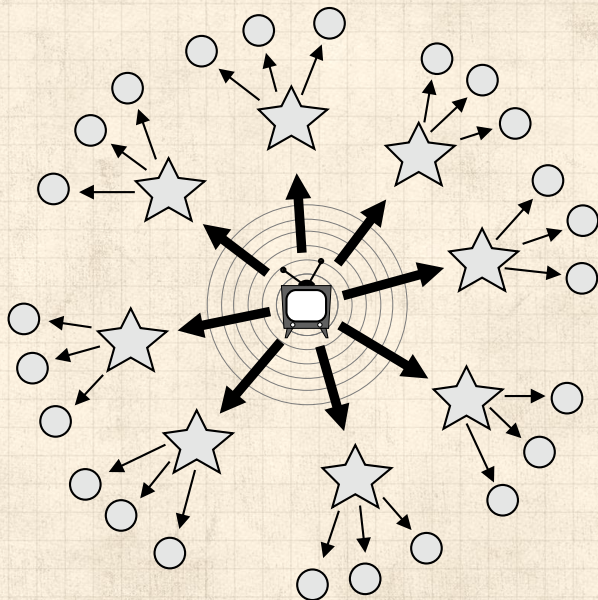
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# The two step model of influence: [2]



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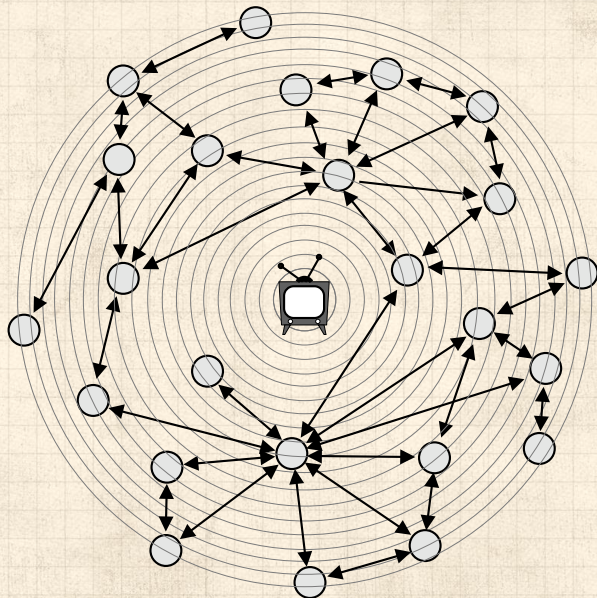
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# The network model of influence:



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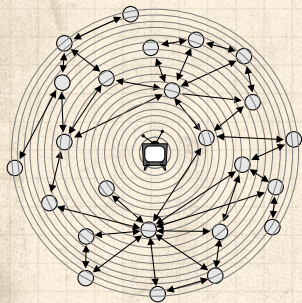
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# The network model of influence:



## How superspreading works:

Many interconnected, average, trusting people must benefit from both **receiving** and **sharing** a message far from its source.


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“Influentials, Networks, and Public Opinion Formation” 

Watts and Dodds,

J. Consum. Res., **34**, 441–458, 2007. <sup>[5]</sup>



# Things that spread quickly:



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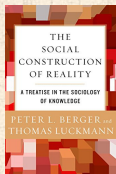
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+ News ...

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

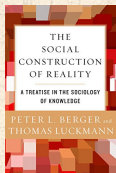





"The social construction of reality: A treatise  
in the sociology of knowledge"    
by Berger and Luckmann (1991). <sup>[1]</sup>


 Reality is socially constructed ,  
to some hard-to-measure degree.






"The social construction of reality: A treatise  
in the sociology of knowledge" [a](#) [↗](#)  
by Berger and Luckmann (1991). [1]

 Reality is socially constructed [↗](#),  
to some hard-to-measure degree.

 People do and don't see this: Fate versus Fortune.



## Etymological clarity:

 **Fate**—from the Latin *fatus*: meaning “spoken”.

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## Etymological clarity:

 **Fate**—from the Latin *fatus*: meaning “spoken”.

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“It is written”, fore-tell, pre-dict.

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
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
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# Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray

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“There is only one  
thing in the world



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JULY, 1890

# LIPPINCOTT'S

MONTHLY MAGAZINE

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“There is only one  
thing in the world

worse than being  
talked about,



# Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray

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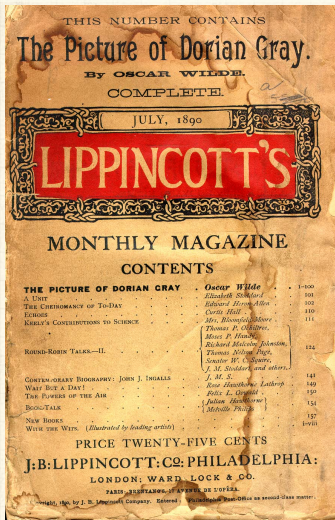
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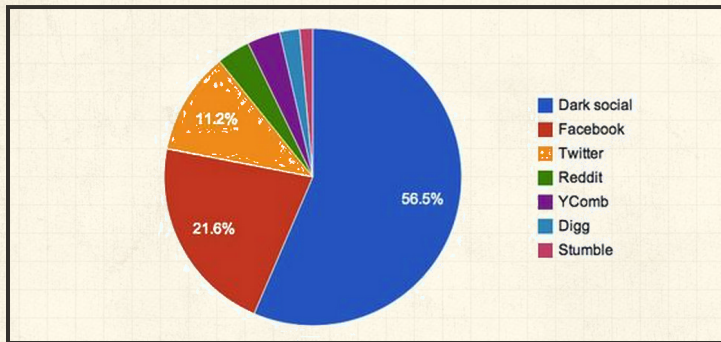
and that is

not being talked  
about.”



# 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. [sic]”



Dark Social: We Have the Whole History of the Web

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# A completely made up pie chart:



Real  
Dark  
Social



Measurable  
Web  
stuff

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# How to make things spread (maybe):

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## Shareworthy Content is King:

1. Build entities/messages/stories that have intrinsic and social value out in the **Social Wild**.



## 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.



## 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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