

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

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Principles of Complex Systems, Vols. 1, 2, & 3D  
CSYS/MATH 6701, 6713, & a pretend number,  
2023–2024 | @pocsvox

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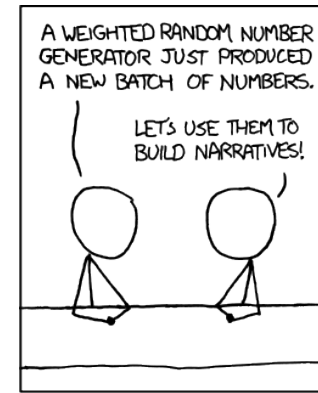
# The dismal predictive powers of editors .....



Twelve ...

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# Reason 1—We are Homo Narrativus.



ALL SPORTS COMMENTARY

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

# Mistake 1: Success is due to intrinsic properties

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# Outline

Superstars

Superspreading

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# The completely unpredicted fall of Eastern Europe:



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

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# The most famous painting in the world:



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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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See "Becoming Mona Lisa" by David Sassoon



48 songs  
30k participants

# Exp 1— weak social

Artist	Genre	Participants	Songs
... (many rows) ...			

# Exp. 2—strong social

Artist	Genre	Participants	Songs
... (many rows) ...			

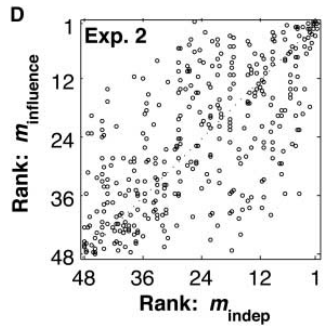


"An experimental study of inequality and unpredictability in an artificial cultural market"

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

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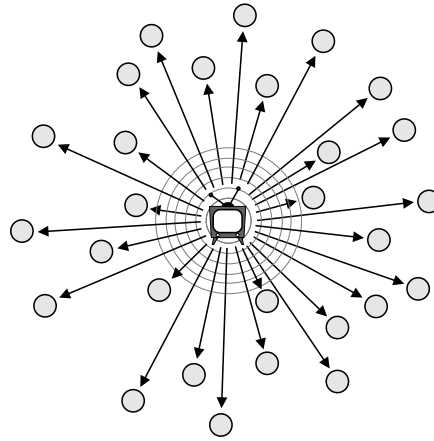
## Resolving the paradox:



Increased social awareness leads to Stronger inequality + Less predictability.

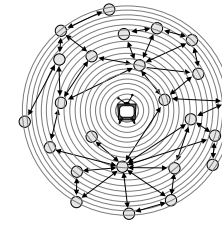
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## The hypodermic model of influence:



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## The network model of influence:



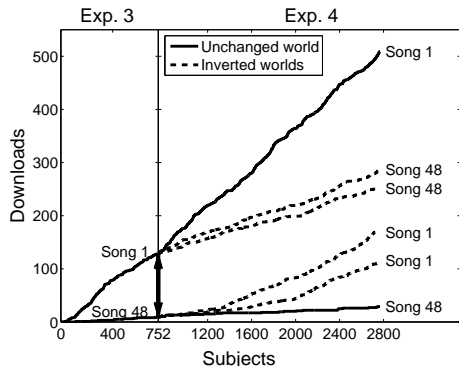
How superspreading works:  
Many interconnected, average, trusting people must benefit from both receiving and sharing a message far from its source.



"Influentials, Networks, and Public Opinion Formation" [↗](#)  
Watts and Dodds,  
J. Consum. Res., **34**, 441–458, 2007. <sup>[5]</sup>

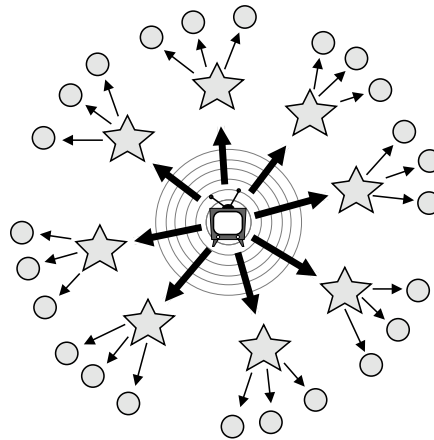
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## Payola/Deceptive advertising hurts us all:



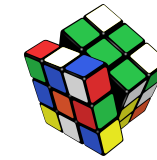
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## The two step model of influence:



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## Things that spread quickly:



+ News ...

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

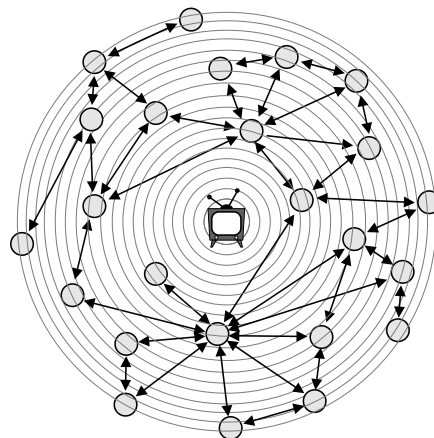
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Mistake 2:  
Seeing success is 'due to social' and wanting to say 'all your interactions are belong to us'



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## The network model of influence:



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"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.

[↗](#) People do and don't see this: Fate versus Fortune.

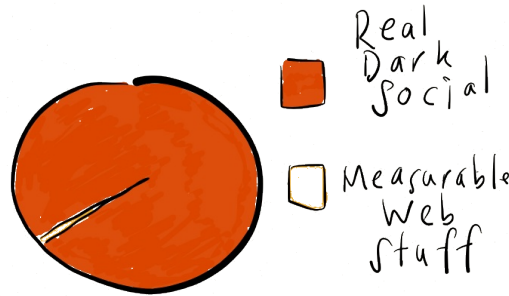
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## Etymological clarity:

- 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.”<sup>1</sup>
- 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**<sup>2</sup>: Repeatedly named, talked about. Old French *renon*, from re- + non (“name”).
- Réclame**<sup>3</sup>. “Clamo”—Proto-Indo-European: “to shout” (again). Connected to “lowing”.

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## A completely made up pie chart:



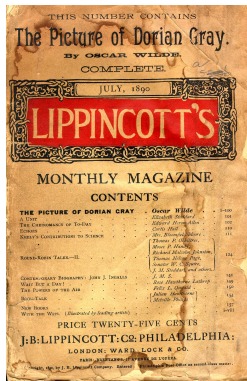
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- T. Kuran. Now out of never: The element of surprise in the east european revolution of 1989. World Politics, 44:7–48, 1991. [pdf](#)
- M. J. Salganik, P. S. Dodds, and D. J. Watts. An experimental study of inequality and unpredictability in an artificial cultural market. Science, 311:854–856, 2006. [pdf](#)

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## 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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## Story wars:

### Shareworthy content:

- 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.

### Stopping bad shareworthy content:

- The truth is against an infinitude of adjacent narratives.
- Build better spreading true stories.
- Defend social interactions (“do you know who<sup>1</sup> your friends have been imitating?”)
- Just keep trying.

<sup>1</sup>The whomists are followers of MGGA

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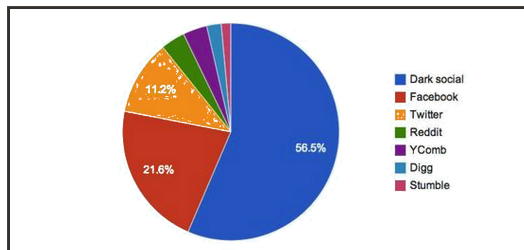
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- D. J. Watts and P. S. Dodds. Influentials, networks, and public opinion formation. Journal of Consumer Research, 34:441–458, 2007. [pdf](#)

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## 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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