

How the Internet has come to both limit and foster the spread of Social Epidemics

Simply, the internet has done both. Social epidemics like Facebook.com and YouTube have had the ability to grow rapidly, connecting through people of varied backgrounds. The internet has opened the arena for the lay person to have the ability to create a social epidemic. Previously, the field was kept closed by large companies and those with a firm hold on traditional marketing mediums. These expensive means of advertising caused a stranglehold on social epidemics. Prior to the internet, individuals were left with regional influences and externalities impacting decisions and the spread of epidemics. In this regard, the door has been opened for many more individuals to be at the root of one social epidemic. The result is more possible social epidemics than previously that have the opportunity to grow and take hold.

The unfortunate result of the internet is the lowered reliance on regional externalities to affect the growth of epidemics. The internet has caused us to move into more specified personal categories and interests. As an example, Unity08 (www.unity08.com) wanted to jumpstart a movement to take back politics. The idea is to make a statement to politicians that our moderate voices can be heard. Unity08 knew that its strongest alliance would be in independent and dedicated bloggers. The group's launch was not in the national media, but rather in the political blogging community. It found great success in targeting this specific category online. It serves as an example that there is now the opportunity for more specific epidemics to grow. The internet allows an epidemic with

an identifiable target to spread more rapidly by seeking out those specific targets and using more specific externalities, be it influence, motivation or coercion, to succeed.

Random, broad-based social epidemics are less likely to spread unless they strike a very common thread in every individual. Facebook & MySpace targeted the need to connect and YouTube targeted the need to see fellow humans acting like idiots. They were successful because they were the first to revolutionize their sector. Because they are so powerful and have such a social presence, it is now harder for similar epidemics to spread. It is the theory of always copied, never duplicated in these stories.

The internet will cause many more competing epidemics than previously seen, but with fewer who succeed in their category. The result is more specified epidemics that don't extend far out of intended range, unless the idea is tremendously universal. Because the internet is so vast, unless an epidemic targets individuals likely to be influenced it can be a futile attempt to succeed in an online social epidemic. The internet has turned more people to one location for information, creating a larger captive audience. At the same time it has turned people away from traditional and very effective tools for spreading a social epidemic to a much less effective tool (the internet). The internet is less effective because it is more difficult to present a moderately broad social epidemic, whereas extremely broad and extremely specific find more success.

Essentially, the internet has allowed more individuals the ability to begin a social epidemic, but this, in itself, hurts the spread of the total number of social epidemics. An

individual can only be influenced, motivated or coerced by a certain number of externalities to act in a certain manner or follow a certain path. Assuming that the number of total social epidemics humans are able to absorb and take in has not change much, if at all, and now there are even more possible epidemics, the likelihood of one specific epidemic catching hold is now greatly reduced.