

I argue that the American adoption of the internet makes it much easier for social epidemics to occur.

The first reason that I believe this is that it is such a powerful networking tool that can unite even the most geographically disparate people into powerful groups that would not have otherwise formed.

I have witnessed firsthand the evolution of the indie rock scene since pre-internet times. I have literally seen hundreds of shows in the past decade. Before, indie shows were practically never sold out; the band had to be around for years and probably had signed a major label before it had any chance. Once pitchforkmedia.com gained popularity though, it turned indie music on its head. Now, anyone who gets a 9/10 review on the site is instantly known among a couple hundred thousand people or so, and that means I actually have to buy tickets for shows before the day of. This has had the effect of further commercializing indie music. These 'social epidemics' would not have occurred without the internet; it was information externalities that allowed them.

Facebook.com exemplifies the power of the social epidemic. When my friend is doing something cool that he wants others to join him in, he can just send an invitation to his friends, who can send invitations to others. When the idea is to raise money or awareness about a situation like Darfur, the internet is undoubtedly a force to be reckoned with; considering that the mainstream hardly reports on it, how could I have otherwise learned about it or further investigated without the internet? In this way I believe that the internet pushes us towards passing the critical threshold in social epidemics.

The second reason I believe that the internet makes it much easier for social epidemics to occur is that it is such a powerful medium for the collection and diffusion of information; in the past, if I wanted to find information about the Bering ice bridge between Alaska and Russia, I would have had to make a physical effort to go to the library or mail an expert to get it. This would require remembering to do it, sustaining my motivation to find out, going through the hassle of finding it at the library, and most importantly to me, an excessive waste of my time. Likewise for practically any other specific knowledge I want. But the internet has completely changed this. I can google it or enter it on wikipedia, and I am already beginning to self-educate myself in mere moments. And if I am so stimulated or motivated, I can follow-up and get to the hard references at the library.

Now I understand the objection that the internet only would cause more clustering via group-specific but not population-wide epidemics, but I simply don't buy it. We are not segregating ourselves into distinct groups with distinct ideologies, because most people do not identify themselves with single entities. Rather, the internet fosters exchange of perspectives and opinions. In CS103 speak: considering that social networking sites foster new social connections, not only do clusters grow in size, but they also become more interconnected between clusters, bringing everyone closer together in terms of being adjacent nodes in a network, no matter the differences in with whom or what they associate themselves; I might not be friends with *any* republicans, but I am sure to have a friend who does and so on. I believe that this encourages social epidemics at large because of how interconnected everybody is becoming.

A second objection would state that information gets homogenized on the internet, even if it is false; we could *all* potentially be believing the *wrong* thing. I believe that the quality of information on the internet will only get better. Contrasting information battles its out via being factually supported, a feat made easy when we can link to sources. I have seen good arguments lose their steam and become impotent when they get hung up on the facts, debating particulars; the internet fosters a solution to this problem. I have witnessed this personally; when my friends and I hang out in the main room arguing, we can immediately reference the internet and multiple sources for hard data and get on with our points. I find this to be amazingly facilitative and undoubtedly constructive.

It does not matter if being more interconnected makes us less vulnerable as nodes by elevating our thresholds for activation, because the stuff that activates us, ideas, are becoming more refined and supported, thus encouraging their spread at large (assuming people aren't nitwits), thereby overcoming a need for greater activation in the individual. This should encourage social epidemics.