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1. The Accidental Influentials *

In his best-selling book *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell argues that “social epidemics” are driven in large part by the actions of a tiny minority of special individuals, often called influentials, who are unusually informed, persuasive, or well connected. The idea is intuitively compelling—we think we see it happening all the time—but it doesn’t explain how ideas actually spread.

The supposed importance of influentials derives from a plausible-sounding but largely untested theory called the “two-step flow of communication”: Information flows from the media to the influentials and from them to everyone else. Marketers have embraced the two-step flow because it suggests that if they can just find and influence the influentials, those select people will do most of the work for them. The theory also seems to explain the sudden and unexpected popularity of certain looks, brands, or neighborhoods. In many such cases, a cursory search for causes finds that some small group of people was wearing, promoting, or developing whatever it is before anyone else paid attention. Anecdotal evidence of this kind fits nicely with the idea that only certain special people can drive trends.

In recent work, however, my colleague Peter Dodds and I have found that influentials have far less impact on social epidemics than is generally supposed. In fact, they don’t seem to be required at all.

Our argument stems from a simple observation about social influence: With the exception of celebrities like Oprah Winfrey—whose outsize presence is primarily a function of media, not interpersonal, influence—even the most influential members of a population simply don’t interact with that many others. Yet it is precisely these noncelebrity influentials who, according to the two-step-flow theory, are supposed to drive social epidemics, by influencing their friends and colleagues directly. For a social epidemic to occur, however, each person so affected must then influence his or her own acquaintances, who must in turn influence theirs, and so on; and just how many others pay attention to each of *these* people has little to do with the initial influential. If people in the network just two degrees removed from the initial influential prove resistant, for example, the cascade of change won’t propagate very far or affect many people.

Building on this basic truth about interpersonal influence, Dodds and I studied the dynamics of social contagion by conducting thousands of computer simulations of populations, manipulating a number of variables relating to people’s ability to influence others and their tendency to be influenced. Our work shows that the principal requirement for what we call “global cascades”—the widespread propagation of influence through networks—is the presence not of a few influentials but, rather, of a critical mass of easily influenced people, each of whom adopts, say, a look or a brand after being exposed to a single adopting neighbor. Regardless of how influential an individual is locally, he or she can exert global influence only if this critical mass is available to propagate a chain reaction.

To be fair, we found that in certain circumstances, highly influential people have a significantly greater chance of triggering a critical mass—and hence a global cascade—than ordinary people. Mostly, however, cascade size and frequency depend on the availability and connectedness of easily influenced people, not on the characteristics of the initiators—just as the size of a forest fire often has little to do with the spark that started it and lots to do with the state of the forest. If the network permits global cascades because it has the right concentration and configuration of adopters, virtually

anyone can start one. If it doesn't permit cascades, nobody can. What seems in retrospect to be the special influential quality of a particular person (or group) is, therefore, mostly an accident of location and timing.

Although at odds with the dominant interpretation of the two-step flow, our results are actually consistent with a great deal of influentials research—in particular, the finding that influence in any given circumstance depends not only on such personal characteristics as expertise, charisma, and popularity, but also on the details of the circumstance itself. Sometimes people are influential because they are outspoken and gregarious, other times because they are introspective and reflective. Sometimes they are central members of particular groups, and other times they are peripheral. Sometimes they are innovators, and sometimes they are laggards. There are, in fact, so many ways for people to be influential, and so many kinds of influentials, that it is almost impossible to generalize from one situation to another. What our work clarifies, however, is that such generalizations are difficult not because of insufficient data but because any focus on individual attributes alone overlooks the importance of network effects.

Understanding that trends in public opinion are driven not by a few influentials influencing everyone else but by many easily influenced people influencing one another should change how companies incorporate social influence into their marketing campaigns. Because the ultimate impact of any individual—highly influential or not—depends on decisions made by people one, two, or more steps away from her or him, word-of-mouth marketing strategies shouldn't focus on finding supposed influentials. Rather, marketing dollars might better be directed toward helping large numbers of ordinary people—possibly with Web-based social networking tools—to reach and influence others just like them.

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