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Contagious

WHY THINGS CATCH ON

JONAH BERGER

"Jonah Berger knows more about what makes information 'go viral' than anyone in the world." —DANIEL GILBERT, Professor of Psychology, Harvard University and author of *Stumbling on Happiness*
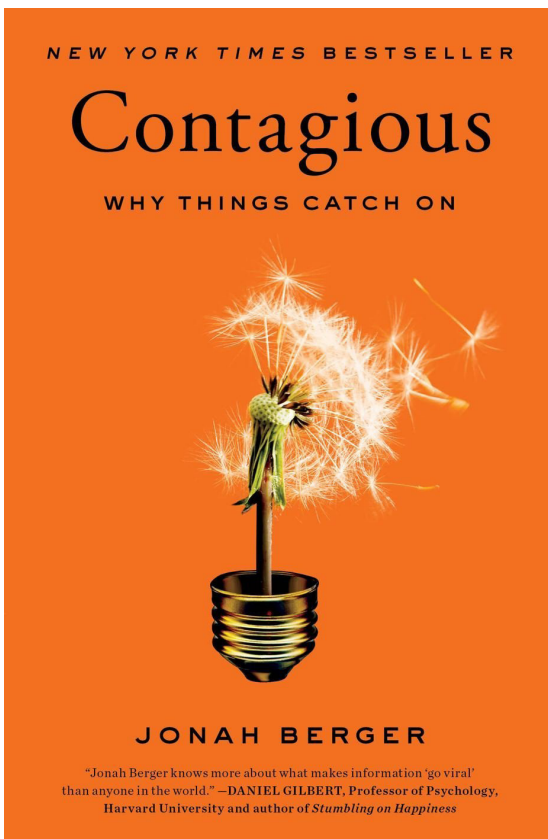
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If you said advertising, think again. People don't listen to advertisements, they listen to their peers. But why do people talk about certain products and ideas more than others? Why are some stories and rumors more infectious? And what makes online content go viral?

Wharton marketing professor Jonah Berger has spent the last decade answering these questions. He's studied why *The New York Times* articles make the paper's own Most Emailed List, why products get word of mouth, and how social influence shapes everything from the cars we buy to the clothes we wear to the names we give our children. In this book, Berger reveals the secret science behind word of mouth and social transmission. Discover how six basic principles drive all sorts of things to become contagious, from consumer products and policy initiatives to workplace rumors and YouTube videos.

Learn more about Jonah and his book:
http://jonahberger.com/

Contagious: Why Things Catch On

Most Emailed Lists and the Importance of Sharing

Humans are social animals. As discussed in the chapter on Social Currency, people love to share opinions and information with others. And our tendency to gossip—for good or ill—shapes our relationships with friends and colleagues alike.

The Internet has become increasingly engineered to support these natural inclinations. If people come across a blog post about a new bike sharing program or find a video that helps kids solve tough algebra problems, they can easily hit the Share button or copy and paste the link into an email.

Most major news or entertainment websites take the extra step of documenting what has been passed along most frequently. Listing which articles, videos, and other content have been most viewed or shared over the past day, week, or month.

People often use these lists as shortcuts. There is way too much content available to sift through it all—hundreds of millions of websites and blogs, billions of videos. For news alone, dozens of highly reputable outlets continuously produce new articles.

Few people have time to seek out the best content in this ocean of information. So they start by checking out what others have shared.

As a result, most shared lists have a powerful ability to shape public discourse. If an article about financial reform happens to make the list, while one about environmental reform barely falls short, that initially small difference in interest can quickly become magnified. As more people see and share the article about financial reform, citizens may become convinced that financial reform deserves more governmental attention than environmental reform, even if the financial issue is mild and the environmental issue severe.

So why does some content make the Most Emailed list while other content does not?

For something to go viral, lots of people have to pass along the same piece of content at around the same time. You might have enjoyed Denise Grady's cough article, and maybe you shared it with a couple of friends. But for the piece to make the Most Emailed list, a large number of people had to make the same decision you did.

Is this just random? Or might there be some consistent patterns underlying viral success?

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Systematically Analyzing the Most Emailed List

The life of a Stanford graduate student is far from grand. My office, if you could call it that, was a high-walled cubicle. It was tucked up in a windowless attic of a 1960s-era building whose architectural style has often been described as "brutalist." A short, squat structure with concrete walls so thick they could probably withstand a direct hit from a small grenade launcher. Sixty of us were clustered together in a cramped space, and my own ten-by-ten fluorescent-lit box was shared with another student.

The one upside was the elevator. Graduate students were expected to be working at all times of the day and night, so the school gave us a keycard that allowed 24-hour access to a special lift. Not only did it take us up to our windowless workstations, it also gave us access to the library, even after it closed. Not the most lavish perk, but a useful one.

Back then the distribution of online content was not as sophisticated as it is today. Content websites now post their most emailed lists online, but some newspapers published these lists in their print editions as well. Every day *The Wall Street Journal* published a list of the five most read articles and the five most emailed articles from the previous day's news. After scanning a couple of these lists, I was enthralled. It seemed like the perfect data source to study why some things get shared more than others.

So just as a stamp collector collects stamps, I began to collect the *Journal*'s Most Emailed list.

Once every couple of days I would use the special elevator to go hunting. I would take my trusty scissors down to the library late at night, find a stack of the most recent print editions of the *Journal*, and carefully clip out the Most Emailed lists.

After a few weeks, my collection had grown. I had a big stack of news clippings and was ready to go. I entered the lists in a spreadsheet and began looking for patterns. One day "Dealing with the Dead Zone: Spouses Too Tired to Talk" and "Disney Gowns Are for Big Girls" were two of the most emailed articles. A few days later "Is an Economist Qualified to Solve Puzzle of Autism?" and "Why Birdwatchers Now Carry iPods and Laser Pointers" made the list.

Hmm. On the face of it, these articles had few characteristics in common. What did tired spouses have to do with Disney gowns? And what did Disney have to do with economists studying autism? The connections were not going to be obvious.

Further, reading one or two articles at a time wasn't going to cut it. To get a handle on things, I needed to work faster and more efficiently.

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Luckily, my colleague, Katherine Milkman, suggested a vastly improved method. Rather than pull this information from the print newspaper by hand, why not automate the process?

With the help of a computer programmer, we created a web crawler. Like a never-tiring reader, the program automatically scanned *The New York Times* home page every 15 minutes, recording what it saw. Not only the text and title of each article, but also who wrote it and where it was featured (posted on the main screen or hidden in a trail of links). It also recorded in which section of the physical paper (health or business, for example) and on what page the article appeared (such as the front page or the back of the third section).

After six months, we had a huge data set—every article published by *The New York Times* over that period. Almost seven thousand articles. Everything from world news and sports to health and technology, as well as which articles made the Most Emailed list for those same six months.

Not just what one person shared, but a measure of what all readers, regardless of their age, wealth, or other demographics, were sharing with others.

Now our analysis could begin.

First, we looked at the general topic of each article. Things like health, sports, education, or politics.

The results showed that education articles were more likely to make the Most Emailed list than sports articles. Health pieces were more viral than political ones.

Nice. But we were more interested in understanding what drives sharing than in simply describing the attributes of content that was shared. Okay, so sports articles are less viral than dining articles. But why? It's like saying people like to share pictures of cats or talk about paintball more than Ping-Pong. That doesn't really tell us much about why that is happening or allow us to make predictions beyond the narrow domains of cat stuff or sports that start with the letter P.

Two reasons people might share things are that they are interesting and that they are useful. As we discussed in the Social Currency chapter, interesting things are entertaining and reflect positively on the person who shares them. Similarly, as we'll discuss in the Practical Value chapter, sharing useful information helps others and makes the sharer look good in the process.

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To test these theories, we hired a small army of research assistants to score *New York Times* articles on whether they contained useful information and how interesting they were. Articles about things like how Google uses search data to track the spread of the flu were scored as highly interesting, while an article about the change in the cast of a Broadway play was scored as less interesting. Articles about how to control your credit score were scored as being very useful, while the obituary of an obscure opera singer was scored as not useful. We fed these scores into a statistical analysis program that compared them with the Most Emailed lists.

As we expected, both characteristics influenced sharing. More interesting articles were 25 percent more likely to make the Most Emailed list. More useful articles were 30 percent more likely to make the list.

These results helped explain why health and education articles were highly shared. Articles about these topics are often quite useful. Advice on how to live longer and be happier. Tips for getting the best education for your kids.

But there was still one topic that stood out like a sore thumb: science articles. For the most part, these articles did not have as much Social Currency or Practical Value as articles from more mainstream sections. Yet science articles, like Denise Grady's piece about the cough, made the Most Emailed list more than politics, fashion, or business news. Why?

It turns out that science articles frequently chronicle innovations and discoveries that evoke a particular emotion in readers. That emotion? Awe.

The Power of Awe

Imagine standing on the very edge of the Grand Canyon. The bloodred gorge stretches as far as you can see in every direction. The canyon floor drops precipitously below your feet. You feel dizzy and step back from the edge. Hawks circle through rock crevasses so barren and stripped of vegetation you could as well be on the moon. You are amazed. You are humbled. You feel elevated. This is awe.

According to psychologists Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt, awe is the sense of wonder and amazement that occurs when someone is inspired by great knowledge, beauty, sublimity, or might. It's the experience of confronting something greater than yourself. Awe expands one's frame of reference and drives self-transcendence. It encompasses admiration and inspiration and can be evoked by everything from great works of art or music to religious transformations, from breathtaking natural landscapes to human feats of daring and discovery.

Awe is a complex emotion and frequently involves a sense of surprise, unexpectedness, or mystery. Indeed, as Albert Einstein himself noted, "The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mysterious. It is the power of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead."

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More than any other emotion, awe described what many readers felt after looking at science pieces from *The New York Times*. Take "The Mysterious Cough, Caught on Film." The photo of the cough was stunning both as a visual spectacle and as an idea: that something as mundane as a cough could produce this image and yield secrets capable of solving centuries-old medical mysteries.

We decided to test whether awe drove people to share. Our research assistants went back and scored the articles based on how much awe they evoked. Articles about a new treatment for AIDS or a hockey goalie who plays even though he has brain cancer evoked lots of awe. Articles about holiday shopping bargains evoked little or no awe. We then used statistical analyses to compare these scores with whether articles were highly shared.

Our intuition was right: Awe boosted sharing.

Awe-inspiring articles were 30 percent more likely to make the Most Emailed list. Articles previously judged to have low Social Currency and Practical Value—Grady's cough piece or an article suggesting that gorillas may, like humans, grieve when losing loved ones—nevertheless made the Most Emailed list because of the awe they inspired.