

Ideational Change
Phil Gyford
phil@gyford.com
2000-03-19

The concept of ideational social change, that is, how ideas can cause change, didn't, for me, sit easily compared to other theories of change. While progressive theories describe how society builds on previous achievements, always improving, and technology-based theories describe how new technology can result in dramatic changes in the structure of society, ideational theories seemed to be describing a different concept altogether. It seemed to me that descriptions of how ideas spread through a society (whether that be a nation, a town or a company) were merely describing the effects caused by something else. I could see that technology might cause change: a new method of ploughing might improve crop yields, leading to surplus food which could be sold, allowing farmers to improve their standard of living, for example. But it seemed to me that ideational theories were merely describing how this change, the knowledge of how to plough using this new method, might spread to other farmers. I couldn't see how ideas could be the cause of change; they seemed like things which were affected by change.

I had these thoughts at the back of my mind for a couple of weeks, trying to make sense of them and then, within the space of a week, they began to make sense. At the recent SXSW conference in Austin, Stewart Brand gave a keynote speech about his Long Now Foundation¹. The idea behind this is that humans seem to be concentrating increasingly on things that change rapidly, while the real power is in things that change slowly. As an illustration he showed a diagram which illustrated how different things change at different speeds, in order from slow to fast: nature, culture, governance, infrastructure, commerce, fashion. Depending on how these are defined, I would question some of the ordering, but the point remains. One danger of this concentration on the faster things is that only those people who are able to keep up will know how the world works. If you're not at the cutting edge you'll be at a distinct disadvantage.

Brand was describing a world in which ideas are spreading ever more quickly, in which there is an insatiable appetite for trivial and ephemeral information at the expense of the meaningful and substantial. I was also reading *Miss Wyoming* by Douglas Coupland, and another part of the puzzle slipped suddenly into place. One character, Randy, spends his evenings feeding

thousands of deceptions into a Dell PC which multiplied them like viruses, out into the world of electrons. Most of his rumours died, but some became self-fulfilling prophecies. Who could have known that young ingenue truly *was* so ripe to become a compulsive handwasher?²

Not only was this describing the spread of ideas, via the gossip-hungry denizens of the Internet, but it was describing a source of ideas. Previously I'd only been able to conceive of ideas being caused by other changes, yet this was the birthplace of new information. This paragraph was describing memes, Richard Dawkins' concept of ideas as entities which evolve and propagate through a culture just as genes do in the physical world. Memes could be stories like those Randy creates and lets loose onto the Internet, akin to the urban legends which spread and re-occur time and time again. Or they could be catchphrases, such as Homer Simpson's trademark "Doh!", which spread far from their source. Or traditions, ways of doing business, fashions... and these all had to start somewhere, just as in

evolution there must have been a creature that could be described as the first entity to be alive. Just as that creature evolved and spread over time and space, so these ideas began somewhere and then dispersed. I was beginning to understand how ideational change could describe not just the effect, but also the cause of change.

Then, as all this began to make sense, I read a review³ of Malcolm Gladwell's new book *The Tipping Point* which describes the spread of ideas in terms of epidemiology. Suddenly I knew I was on the right track. At first it had seemed that descriptions of spreading ideas (whether the metaphor is viruses or genes) were describing the spread of some new, say, technological, change. Now it seemed clear that this technological change itself was caused by an idea, and it was this original idea that was spreading. It's a subtle difference. To continue the earlier example, I had originally seen the plough as a technological development which occurred somewhere and then ideational change would merely be describing the new plough concept. Now I realised that the new plough didn't simply occur, but was caused by an idea, and it was this original idea that was spreading.

So, how exactly do ideas begin? If we're talking about a virus-like idea which many people in a society have caught, where did it begin, who is its patient zero? In his 1997 *New Yorker* article 'The Coolhunters'⁴, Gladwell described Baysie and DeeDee, two "coolhunters" working for sneaker companies whose job was to search out what the coolest kids were into, and report back so next season's styles would be in step with emerging fashions. It's a search for the origin of a trend, finding out what will be big, what everyone will one day be wearing or doing, in order to remain ahead.

As an example of the emergence of a new idea Gladwell recounts the story of two classic Hush Puppy styles. These, the Duke and the Columbia, were selling only 65,000 pairs per year and the company was trying to move away from what they saw as an old fashioned suede look. However, someone told the Hush Puppy executives that these styles were becoming popular in parts of New York, that they were being bought from small stores as authentic and original shoes, a move away from modernity. Soon, in 1994, they found these styles were popular with major fashion designers, and film stars in Los Angeles began asking for them. This fashion spread swiftly and in 1995 430,000 pairs were sold, rising to 1,600,000 the following year. And the revival was only just beginning in the rest of the world.

It's not just in the fickle and swift-moving world of fashion that ideas emerge and spread rapidly through society. In *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, Charles Mackay recounts the birth of "Tulipomania," the incredible boom in the market for tulips in the 17th century. The flower had been popular in Constantinople for many years, and Conrad Gesner claims to have been the first to spot tulips in Augsburg, Germany in 1559 in the garden of Counsellor Herwart, a well known collector. For maybe a dozen years after, the wealthy in Germany and Holland sent for the flowers from Constantinople, and the first to be planted in England arrived from Vienna in 1600. The tulip became increasingly popular and by 1634 all wealthy men of taste were expected to have a collection of the flowers. From here the fashion spread through society:

The rage for possessing them soon caught the middle classes of society, and merchants and shopkeepers, even of moderate means, began to vie with each other in the rarity of these flowers and the preposterous prices they paid for them.⁵

The way this craze for tulips spread, from an expert to an increasingly large number of those with a high social status and then on to the rest of society, echoes the pattern found in the classic diffusion research study, and all such studies since. In 1943 Bryce Ryan and Neal C. Gross conducted interviews with hundreds of farmers in Iowa to examine the adoption of hybrid corn. This corn had many advantages to traditional varieties, but it required the farmers to change their behaviour as they had to buy new stocks every year rather than keep seeds from their current crop to sow the following year. All but two of the 259 farmers included in the final study adopted the new corn in the 13 years between 1928 and 1941. In the first five years only 10 percent used it, but three years later this was up to 40 percent. The rate of adoption then slowed over the remaining years. Plotting the accumulated number of farmers using hybrid corn creates an S-curve, a shape which would also apply to the fashion for classic Hush Puppies or the craze for tulips.

The farmers who adopted hybrid corn in the first few years, the early adopters, were generally wealthier, better educated and more cosmopolitan compared to the later adopters, further up the S-curve. We can break the categories of adopters down further, as Everett M. Rogers does in *Diffusion of Innovations*⁶. For example, the very first adopters of something are Innovators, who are willing to take a chance on something new, perhaps from outside the system. These are the people Gladwell's coolhunters are seeking. However, Innovators aren't able to lead opinion, to persuade the rest of society to follow their lead. This is up to the Early Adopters who have the respect of more people, and who will provide an evaluation of the new idea upon which the next in line, the Early Majority, can decide whether to take up the innovation.

Obviously, if these sections of society are setting the trends they are extremely influential, and this is recognised by more people than the coolhunters. Viral marketing is a technique, similar to word-of-mouth, that can be used to spread the word about a new product or service. Virgin Net, an internet service provider in the UK, used this method successfully for a promotional scheme as described in this email to the UK Net Marketing mailing list:

Date: Tue, 22 Feb 2000 18:29:25 +0000
From: Jo Peat <jo@london.virgin.net>
Organization: Virgin Net
To: uk-netmarketing@chinwag.com
Subject: Re: UKNM: benign viruses

We ran a very successful viral marketing campaign with the Virgin Net cinema ticket giveaway.

We emailed just 25 opinion formers and all 20,000 tickets were snapped up in less than three hours. At its peak we received 450 emails a minute, demand outstripping reply by about 2 to 1. Requests even arrived 6 hours after the promotion ended.

This technique shows the influence of a society's Early Adopters, but bypasses the Innovators stage. While the coolhunters are out looking for new ideas developing among the Innovators, which they will then package and market to the Early Adopters, this case of viral marketing is relying on a basic idea which already obviously exists – the desire for free cinema tickets.

So now it seems clear how ideas can cause change, as ideas are the basis of all other changes. While technology can facilitate change, and its progress depends on existing

technology, someone must have an idea in order for developments to take place, and this is what will spread, meme- or virus-like through society.

An interesting side-effect of my revelations echo Thomas S. Kuhn's concept of scientific revolutions. He believed that it was impossible to view the world through an old paradigm once you had found a new one. For example, once Einstein's theories were developed it was impossible to see the world purely through Newton's theories. Similarly, I now find it difficult to see how I could have not understood the creation of new ideas only a week ago!

¹ This features the Clock of the Long Now, designed to last 10,000 years to encourage us to think long term, www.longnow.org.

² Douglas Coupland, *Miss Wyoming*, Pantheon, 2000, p229.

³ Gavin McNett, 'Idea Epidemics', Salon, 2000-03-17, www.salon.com/books/feature/2000/03/17/gladwell/index.html

⁴ Malcolm Gladwell, 'The Coolhunters', *New Yorker*, 2000-03-17, www.gladwell.com/1997_03_17_a_cool.htm

⁵ Charles Mackay, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, L.C. Page & Company, 1967 (first published 1841), p89.

⁶ Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, Fourth edition, The Free Press, 1995, pp263-266.