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Notes on Contagious Media

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Global capitalism has produced hundreds of millions of bored office workers who sit in front of computers forwarding emails and surfing the Web. These alienated white-collar professionals spend half their day sharing media with their friends, inadvertently creating the Bored at Work Network (BWN).

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A by-product of alienated labor, the BWN has become the largest alternative to the corporate media. Activists, artists, and hackers can reach millions of people through the BWN, successfully distributing media that governments would deem illegal and corporate outlets would censor.

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The type of media distributed by the BWN is “contagious media.” Contagious media starts small but spreads virally to a large audience because people share it with their friends. Humorous emails, joke websites, web-based games, silly video clips, and political calls to action are often characterized by this sort of viral propagation.

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Blogs, message boards, and email lists accelerate the spread of contagious media. These communication tools are usually maintained as a labor of love. For workers within global capitalism, procrastination and boredom inspire the last surviving forms of unalienated labor.

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Contagious media is best understood from a social perspective. It does not matter if it is an email, a movie, or a game. What matters is how it diffuses virally through human-powered networks.

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Contagious media is the kind of media you immediately want to share with all your friends. This requires that you take pleasure in consuming the media but also pleasure in the social process of passing it on.

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People only remember media that has a social context—we forget about TV shows, websites, and movies unless they inspire conversation, provoke debate, or move us to tell a friend. Contagious media is inherently social, since it is distributed through a network of friends, and this transmission often provokes dialogue. This means that contagious media has a bigger cognitive impact than the majority of broadcast media.

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For the artist, a work can be celebrated even if the only people who like it are a small group of curators and collectors. Furthermore, an artist can be satisfied with a creation for its own sake, even if nobody else appreciates its brilliance. For the contagious media designer, all that matters is how other people see the work. If people don't share the work with their friends, it is a failure regardless of the opinion of the creator, critics, or other elites.

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Contagious media is defined by its audience, not its author. The audience decides if a particular project is art, activism, or entertainment. The audience decides if the project reaches 10 people or 10 million people. The audience is the network and the critic.

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Contagious media is like “tactical media,” without the burden of underground credibility. By definition, the moment media becomes contagious it ceases to be underground.

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“Net art” only makes sense when networks are novel and unfamiliar. Contagious media only makes sense when networks are pervasive and unremarkable.

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If a “meme” is a self-replicating idea (Dawkins, 1990), then contagious media is a meme in the flesh. It is an idea embodied as media that people can share.

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To be successful, contagious media projects must be explainable in one sentence or less: “A phone line for rejecting unwanted suitors”; “A site to rate people based on if they are hot or not”; “A request for a pair of Nike shoes customized with the word ‘sweatshop’”; “A technique to make bonsai kittens”; “The homepage of two white people bragging about how black people love them.” If you need more than a sentence to describe a project, you should probably not bother.

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Contagious media is a form of pop conceptual art, where “the idea is the machine that makes the art” (LeWitt, 1967) *and* the idea is interesting to ordinary people.

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The field of media studies analyzes how various media forms communicate differently: film, TV, print, multimedia, and so on. The study of contagious media ignores format and looks exclusively at how media moves through social networks. It does not matter if the media in question is an email forward, a website, a movie, a TV show, or a text message. All that matters is how it is spreading and the social networks that are facilitating the spread.

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The medium only matters insofar as it limits or enables diffusion. Email forwards and viral text messages can spread with no cost to the original author because they use other people’s servers and networks to propagate. Websites are inexpensive, but the host must bear the cost of bandwidth. Phone tree systems are prohibitively expensive for most artists and activists doing contagious projects. For contagious media, format is not judged on its sensory qualities, but rather its scalability.

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A contagious media project should represent the simplest form of an idea. Fancy design, extra content, or extraneous features make media less contagious. Anything extra constitutes a “payload” that the contagious media needs to drag along as it spreads. The bigger the payload, the more slowly the entire project spreads.

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Contagious media needs to be portable and infinitely reproducible. The easier it is to share and duplicate, the greater the potential that an inherently contagious idea will see the light of day.

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In the early days of the Internet bubble, people thought the Web would replace the mass media. After the crash, people thought that the Web was useless. In fact, mass media and contagious media have a symbiotic relationship. Every successful contagious media project gets coverage by the mass media, and every major mass media story provides the basis for the parody, satire, and critique by contagious media. Contagious media can have an impact by infecting the mass media, but it is also a parasite on the mass media.

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Many contagious media projects are created by accident.

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It is very difficult to predict whether something will become contagious.

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Like other collective nouns, “contagious media” may take a singular or plural verb, depending on the intended meaning.

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This document is about contagious media, but is not intended to be an example of contagious media.

references

Dawkins, R. (1990). *The selfish gene*. New York: Oxford University Press.

LeWitt, S. (1967, June). Paragraphs on conceptual art. *Artforum*, 5, 79–83.