



About Twitter, adaptive systems and antelopes | The Xpragmatic View



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Social technology is transforming our life and our society. Will it be a change for the better or the worse?

Ever since we have discovered the wonders of social computing, on-line collaboration and other wisdoms of crowds, numerous people have been viewing this as a path towards the development of more open, transparent, non-hierarchical business organisations and, more general, of an evolution towards a more social, ecological and truly equitable society.

As a result, we see an increasing number of posts discussing the "larger context" of phenomena such as Twitter and Facebook and business trends such as Enterprise 2.0. An example of this is the interesting [Is Twitter a Complex Adaptive System?](#) blog post by Venessa Miemis that also contains several links to other related posts.

Complex adaptive systems

Yes, at first sight, the mechanics of the use of social tools and solutions have indeed a lot in common with the internal workings of certain aspects of the biosphere and the ecosystem. And yes, without any doubt, these evolutions will have a profound impact on what our future society will look like.

However, is this really the all-is-good evolution we are hoping for or are there serious side-effects?

Nobody can tell.

We sometimes seem to forget that the essence of a complex adaptive system is that it adapts. Not that it goes in the right direction. It will react to changes in the environment and finally settle in a new "stable state". What stable state? Largely unpredictable since the result of an extremely complex interaction of all the "agents" that are part of the system. Largely unpredictable since the smallest event can finally have a major effect. Remember the butterfly.

While looking at nature, we always have an impression of harmony. All things seem to perfectly fit together. We all have seen the numerous documentaries that show us examples of the often-complex interactions between plants, animals or other living creatures, all supporting the further survival of the species.

However, we must not forget that none of these forms of cohabitation are "by design". None of these plants or animals had a plan for doing so. What we are seeing is simply the final result, the outcome of the complex process of adaptation that has brought them into the present form of "stable state". For the dinosaurs, there was no more room and when you are an antelope standing in the African savannah, surrounded by lions, your view on this "harmony" might be different.

Influenced adaptive systems

Also in nature, not all agents in an adaptive system will be equal. Same goes for social networks. As a matter of fact, social networks stimulate the non-equality since they facilitate the discovery of agents that have the greatest "value". These become the so-called "connectors", the individuals everyone is following or connecting to, thereby further increasing the likeliness of being followed or being connected to.

Now, "value" is in this context a very relative concept. Is the person who is writing about a certain subject and who has the most followers indeed the best expert about that subject? Or is he/she simply the better social marketer?

Again, we don't know. There is the belief that the interactions between the individuals in the network will make the better experts become visible, but there is no real guarantee.

However, what we do know is that this process of "emergence" will inflate even small differences in perceived value. It is a similar process of "cumulative advantage" as we have described in [The logic of random](#). If the first individuals who started following person x did so because x is indeed an authority for that subject, then we are OK. However, if they did so because x simply was the first-mover or did blog a lot, then we might get into trouble since these initial votes are likely to attract more votes, which will then...

Uniform adaptive systems

So, what we are essentially seeing is an evolution towards networks of the few. Networks whereby only a few individuals will dominate our thinking about a given subject.

This process is further accelerated by the existing information overflow. The amount of information that now is available to us makes that increasingly, we will rely upon other individuals to become filters for specific parts of that information, largely outsourcing our individual opinion creation. Twitter lists will be our guide.

The net result will be more uniformity in opinions and taste. In theory, we are living today in an era of unprecedented choice. However, never before we have seen so many people making the same choice for the same product within such a short timeframe (Facebook, iPod) and this trend is likely to accelerate.

This is unfortunate since *"complex adaptive systems use contradictions to create new possibilities to co-evolve with their environment"*. Perhaps we no longer want to evolve. Perhaps we simply want to settle for the stable state.

The ant society

To summarize. We are moving into a direction that is essentially unknown. Increasingly, our thinking is controlled by a small group of individuals or organisations that we might have chosen for the wrong reasons. Increasingly, we are becoming look-a-likes in a flattened society where differentiation only exists in the features of our handheld device.

We don't know whether this will give us our perfect stable state, but it seems that the lions are getting closer...

About the author



Marc Buyens is analyst, management consultant and owner of Xpragma. Marc started Xpragma in 1999 after a 20+ years career in the IT sector. Today, he provides advice, training and mentoring services focusing on the intersection of technological evolution, organisational change and business strategy: a messy world of unfulfilled promises.

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