

EFFECTIVE MEME SPREADING

Plan of the Talk

1. Ideas Matter
2. The Spread of Ideas Depends on Certain Attributes
3. Fecundity, Fidelity, and Longevity

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Ideas Matter

- Skinner v. Chomsky



- Chomsky: “One would naturally expect that prediction of the behavior of a complex organism (or machine) would require, in addition to information about external stimulation, knowledge of the internal structure of the organism, the ways in which it processes input information and organizes its own behavior.”

Cognitive Revolution

- Political Science
 - Waltz v. Wendt
- Economics
 - Friedman v. Kahneman
- History
 - Marx v. North



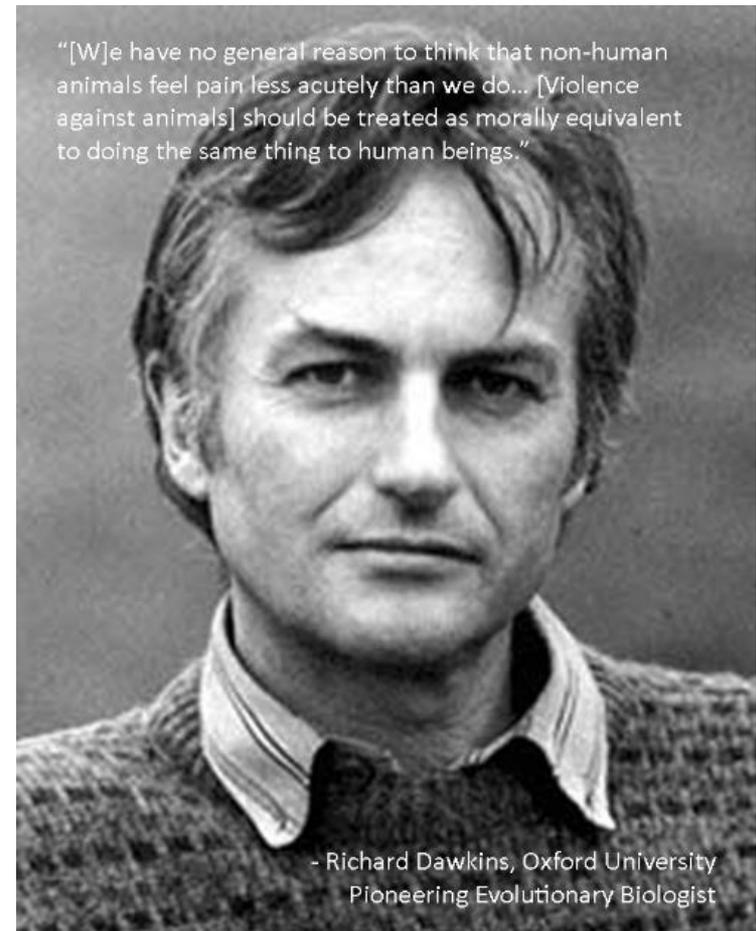
But All Ideas are Not Equal

- Some ideas replicate and spread.
- “Replicators” in biology: Genes.
 - Fecundity: does the gene replicate frequently?
 - Fidelity: does the gene replicate with accuracy?
 - Longevity: does the gene replicate over a long time period?



Mememes: the New Replicators?

- “We, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators.”
- “Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so mememes propagate themselves in the mememe pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.”



Fecundity

- Genes have the inherent drive to replicate.
- Does our message have the same attribute?

In terms of your eating preferences, do you consider yourself to be a vegetarian, or not?

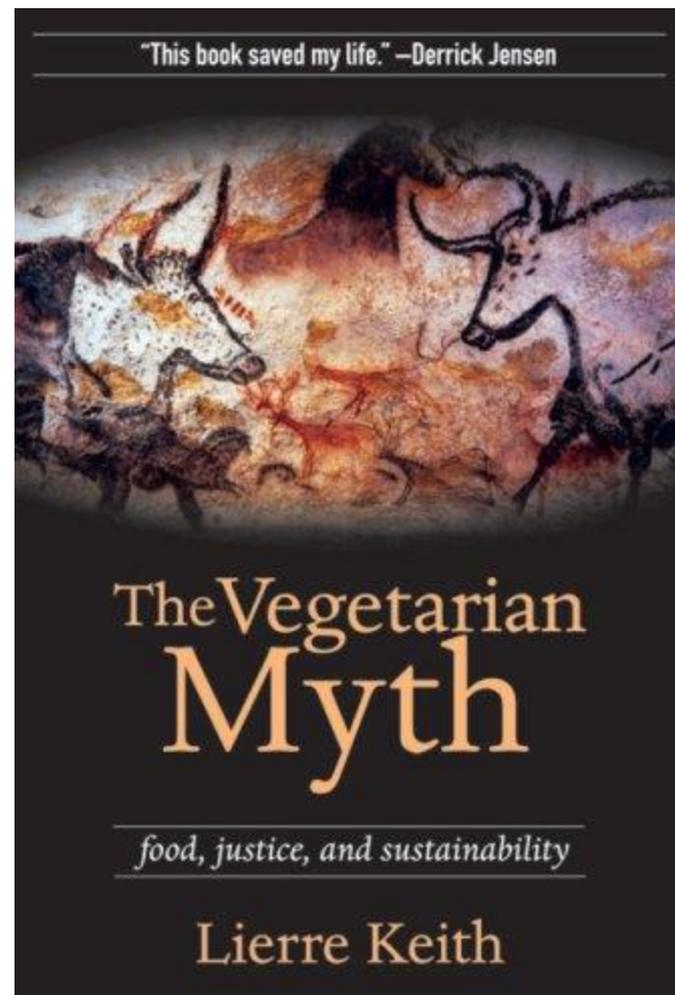
Among national adults

	Yes	No
	%	%
Jul 9-12, 2012	5	94
Jul 19-22, 2001	6	94
Sep 23-26, 1999	6	94

GALLUP®

Fecundity

- Vegetarian outreach has existed for almost two centuries
 - Vegetarianism supposedly endorsed by the American Health Convention in 1838
- Local maxima in the mid 1800s and the 1960s
- “[P]redominant movement strategies have not successfully attracted more people to adopt a vegetarian identity.” *Vegetarianism: Movement or Moment.*
- “The Campaign to Moralize Meat-Eating Has Failed” *Why Are There So Few Vegetarians?*



Fecundity

- Liberation: that we have an obligation to see that every animal is given the same safety, happiness, and freedom that we ask for ourselves.
- Drives toward public action, rather than private consumption.
- But does it work?



Fecundity

- Antislavery
 - 1832 – Shift to Activism (The Liberator is published)
 - 1838 - 45950% increase in number of antislavery societies (4 to 1348)
 - 1862 - Slavery ends
- Civil Rights
 - 1961 – Shift to Activism (Four activists sit-in at Woolsworth)
 - 1963 - 100,000 activists participate in sit-ins and other civil disobedience
 - 1964 - Civil Rights Act bars public discrimination
- Gay Rights
 - 1969 – Shift to Activism (Stonewall)
 - 1971 - 6000% increase in number of gay groups nationally (50 to 2500)
 - Today - Multiple states approve gay marriage

Fecundity: Key Attributes

- Is the idea evangelical?
- Does the idea have life?
 - The Three C's: controversy, conflict, and change.
- Is the idea true?
 - “Truth” is an attribute of viral ideas.



Fidelity

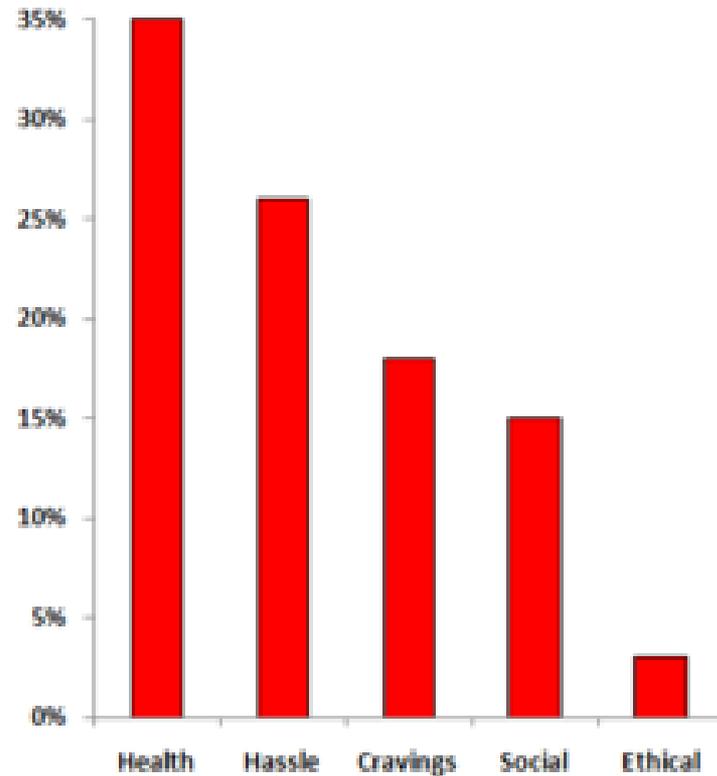
- Genes are accurate replicators.
- Even if an idea reproduces, if it does not maintain its integrity in the face of erosive forces, it will not spread.



Fidelity

The reason for the widespread but mistaken belief that America is rapidly going veg is the mismatch between what people *say* they eat and what they *actually* eat. Take a 2002 Times/CNN poll on the eating habits of 10,000 Americans. Six percent of the individuals surveyed said they considered themselves vegetarian. But when asked by the pollsters what they had eaten in the last 24 hours, 60% of the self-described "vegetarians" admitted that that had consumed red meat, poultry or fish **the previous day**. **In another survey**, the United States Department of Agriculture randomly telephoned 13,313 Americans. Three percent of the respondents answered yes to the question, "Do you consider yourself to be a vegetarian?" A week later the researchers called the participants again and this time asked what they had eaten the day before. The results were even more dramatic than the Times/CNN survey: this time 66% of the "vegetarians" had eaten animal flesh in the last 24 hours.

Fidelity



Source: Motivations For Meat Consumption Among Ex-Vegetarians (2009)

Fidelity

- Same problem exists in genes, but the solution is repair mechanisms
 - Double helix template
 - Genes that are exclusively devoted to nucleotide repair
 - T Cells
- Successful ideas also have repair/feedback mechanisms that reinforce their integrity
 - Christakis and Fowler – “Protective Layer”



Fidelity: Key Attributes

- Does the idea have high clarity and contrast?
- Does the idea have feedback and repair mechanisms?
 - Community reinforcement (double helix template)
 - Norms embedded in the idea that ensure their accurate transmission (repair genes and T cells)



Longevity

- Genes are long-lived, as are the organisms that bear them.
- If a gene does not survive for long, it does not matter if it has fecundity and fidelity.



In the primordial chemical soup, even a few moments of survival was impressive.

Longevity

- Typical activist life is measured in weeks, not months or years.
- Common reasons for burnout:
 - Insufficient initial commitment (hobby v. calling)
 - Pessimism about effectiveness, whether of the movement or particular tactics
 - Pulled toward other social networks with non-liberationist ideologies



Longevity: Key Attributes

- Does the idea inspire long-term commitments?
- Does the idea have a positive and constructive posture?
- Does the idea reinforce a strong community?



Summing Up

- Fecundity
 - Is the idea evangelical?
 - Does the idea have life? (Three C's)
 - Is the idea true?
- Fidelity
 - Does the idea have high clarity and contrast?
 - Does the idea have feedback and repair mechanisms?
- Longevity
 - Does the idea inspire long-term commitments?
 - Does the idea have a positive and constructive posture?
 - Does the idea reinforce a strong community?

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