



MOOD CONTAGION

Mass Psychology and
Collective Behaviour Sociology
in the Internet Age

Maap van Ginneken

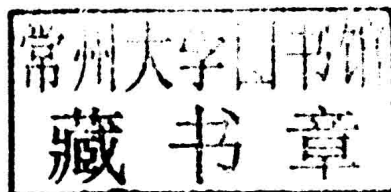
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IN THE INTERNET AGE*

JAAP VAN GINNEKEN



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Mood Contagion

How finding oneself a dissident automatically triggers the primal fear center in our brains . . .

How our heart unwittingly beats at the same pace as that of a relative we see fire walking at a considerable distance . . .

How music, dance and mirroring movements release spurts of ‘dope’ in our brains . . .

How we are infected by the happiness and health of friends of friends we don’t even know . . .

How sports championships on television lead to spikes in sex and births, as well as accidents and murder . . .

How a largely imaginary illness led to a 200 million dollar soft drink recall . . .

How a contagious wave of recent corporate mergers and acquisitions cost 10 trillion dollars, but three quarters did not bring the intended results . . .

How economic insecurity leads to slower top hits, but more upbeat blockbusters, and Playmates with more mature faces and bodies . . .

How computer analysis of Twitter messages is able to predict Oscar winners and television ratings, sales and even the stock market . . .

Mass psychologist Jaap van Ginneken shows how we are continually affected by emotional epidemics – particularly since we are now online 24/7, through mobile devices.

Hypes and scares therefore continually trigger earthquakes and tsunamis in world public opinion. Policymakers and crisis managers increasingly have to scramble to stay on top.

FOREWORD

Test 1: Take a walk with friends, through a busy shopping street. Then stop, stare intently upwards, as if something extremely surprising caught your eye: on the roof of one of the buildings. You may even feign a panic, and duck. Many passers-by will inevitably stop as well and follow your gaze – and even involuntarily catch your apparent fright, without really seeing anything untoward.

Test 2: Use a night-time seminar, a business meeting, a birthday party. Let people form a circle and hold hands. Ask them to be silent, then switch off the light, so that it becomes pitch black. Return to your seat, which is the last place left open. After a few seconds, suddenly squeeze your neighbours' hands very hard. Your squeeze may involuntarily travel the entire circle. Many will be left with goose bumps, and the hair on their arms will stand up – even if you do not cry.

These two tests show that the sudden emotions of others may easily contaminate us – even if we are not assembled, but dispersed. This book is meant to show that emotional contagion happens not only in face-to-face situations, but also through organizations and media, as myriad subtle threads now connect us with each other: for instance through the mobile Internet and the wandering World Wide Web.

I have emphatically tried to include some descriptions of mass psychology/collective behaviour sociology projects that I myself have been involved in over the years – next to themes from other literature and topical stories from the press.

Collective mood swings with regard to an issue in public opinion have meanwhile become increasingly common, particularly since the dawn of the 21st century. Now that electronic links have introduced the instantaneous distribution of messages and images, with new possibilities to share one's reactions within the country and throughout the world in 'real time' – at the slightest touch of a screen.

It is important to recognize this and learn how to deal with it. This book is meant to provide new insights into the threats and opportunities ahead. But first of all, this book needs to be a good read, to stir and startle. Enjoy!

Jaap van Ginneken
Nice, mid 2013

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INTRODUCTION – EMOTION VIRUSES IN THE 21ST CENTURY

An economic climate is usually the result of two trends coming together: on the one hand objective market conditions, on the other hand subjective market sentiments. Unfavourable conditions may thus be further amplified by collective demoralization, rather than collective enthusiasm for the start of a new era. U.S. president Franklin Roosevelt, for one, said during the Great Depression that ‘we have nothing to fear but fear itself’, and launched the New Deal to confront it head on.

Similar things are true today. An economic correspondent for the Reuters news agency recently noted that ‘Fear of the future – justified or not – can create a downward spiral of its own’. He said ‘amplifying nervousness right now is a barrage of disaster commentaries . . . each appearing to outdo the other in dire warnings’. And he quoted the CEO of a major multinational, who warned: ‘It almost looks like the world is worrying itself into another recession’. But the re-election of Obama for a second term and other events seemed to brighten the outlook.

In early 2013 some in Europe saw signs of a turning point and a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel. Mario Draghi, the president of the European Central Bank, had earlier said he would do ‘whatever it takes’ to protect the Euro, which had calmed the financial markets, and lowered borrowing costs for countries in trouble. He now felt the previous negative mood contagion, the vicious circle and the downward spiral had timidly turned into a ‘positive contagion’, a virtuous circle and an upward spiral. British scepticism and the upcoming elections in Italy and Germany might still change the dynamic again. But one headline said, ‘Data point to slow recovery in Europe’; there was good news from Japan, China and other emerging economies, and another headline talked about a ‘Cautious brightening of the global mood’.

Of course there were plenty of problems left, as there is also another element that counts. Crisis managers say that one should never let a good crisis ‘go to waste’, meaning that a crisis – like the earlier private ‘credit’ crisis – should always be used to push through necessary changes that otherwise would have encountered too much resistance. Nothing substantial had been done on that occasion, however, and the problem had predictably returned two years later, this time in its new incarnation of a huge public ‘debt’ crisis. This time, however, a widespread protest wave had called for radical reform and entirely new beginnings.¹

1 **Reuters.** M. Nolan. (20 October 2011). Worrying ourselves into a crisis. *International Herald Tribune* (global edition of the *New York Times*). I use this Franco-American daily as my main journal of record, henceforth abbreviated as *IHT*. The same items often appear around the same date in *The New York Times* itself, abbreviated as *NYT*. **Turning point.** *IHT*, 14 January, 19–20, 21, 25 January 2013.

A NEW TYPE OF WORLDWIDE EPIDEMIC

The buzz offered the strangest sight and sound. Whenever the speaker had completed a sentence, the audience in front repeated it, word for word. Quickly internalized it, then externalized it again, thus tightening the group bond. Listened and spoke, spoke and listened.

Either in a low voice, from person to person, or in a loud voice, all together. In replacement of a microphone and loudspeakers, forbidden by neighbourhood regulations. A new form of communication, harking back to its most archaic predecessors. Resembling electronic messaging through social media, but projected back onto the old canvas of everyday real-life oral exchanges.

The major local newspaper reported: ‘The protesters have set up a kitchen, a legal desk, a sanitation department, a library of donated books, an area where the general assembly meets, a medical station, a media centre where people can recharge their laptops using portable generators and even a general store, called the comfort centre, stocked with donated clothing, bedding, toothpaste and deodorant – like the food, all free for the taking’. Money donated by a supportive public already amounted to no less than three hundred thousand dollars.

Until a few years earlier, the place had been known as Liberty Park. Since then, it had been renamed Zucotti Park, after the chairman of Brookfield Office Properties, which had developed the adjacent buildings in lower Manhattan. As it had officially become a ‘private’ area, the anti-capitalist sleep-over was not automatically forbidden by the police – as it would have been according to city regulations applying to many other ‘public’ squares and parks in New York.

But the meeting was even more unprecedented for its ubiquitous electronic extensions. Goings-on were broadcast live over the Internet, through OccupyWallSt.org and dozens of linked websites. WeAreThe99Percent on Tumblr and dozens of other blogs provided running commentary and discussions.

After four weeks, Twitter already carried an average of ten to fifteen thousand messages per hour (!) on the initiative, whereas the most relevant Facebook page already had one hundred forty thousand members. A survey by the largest national newsweekly *Time* found that a large majority of Americans held a favourable impression at this stage, and only less than a quarter an unfavourable one.

Some nine hundred solidarity meetings had already been set up through Meetup.com. The protests were thus spreading from Boston to Washington, from San Francisco to Los Angeles, from Detroit to Chicago, and dozens of other cities throughout the United States.

Overseas, they spread to Saint Paul’s Cathedral next to ‘The City’ of London in Great Britain, – as well as to financial capitals such as Paris and Brussels, Frankfurt and

Amsterdam, as well as thousands (!) of other locations around the world. The leaderless movement caught not only banks and bankers completely by surprise, but also politicians, the two major parties in the United States and even the larger trade unions.²

WIDESPREAD FEELINGS OF DISSATISFACTION

A *New York Times*/CBS poll found that 89 per cent of Americans said they distrusted the government, 84 per cent disapproved of Congress, 74 per cent said the country was on the wrong track and two-thirds said wealth distribution should be more even.

Few had apparently realized how deeply frustrated ordinary citizens felt about the preceding course of events. The credit crisis had led to a massive bailout of shareholders and bankers, but there had not been any noticeable change in their widespread speculation and bonus culture. Whereas earlier profits had been privatized, it seemed losses had, by contrast, been nationalized and socialized – as lobbyists had succeeded in pushing governments to pick up the tab and pass it on to ordinary citizens by sharply raising taxes and/or reducing benefits.

Meanwhile, academic researchers had shown that since the 1980s deregulation by American President Reagan and British Prime Minister Thatcher, real incomes of workers had remained almost entirely frozen, whereas the income share of the top 1 per cent in the United States had more than doubled.

Corporate profits were at a post-war high, but so was unemployment – particularly among youths, including educated youths. It turned out that the four hundred richest families of the country had already amassed a wealth equalling that of more than half of all lower-income Americans put together. The Census Bureau reported that almost 50 million people, particularly from minorities, lived below the poverty line: the highest number in the more than half-century that it had been publishing figures.

The prairie fire of outrage had been lit by a single spark during the previous summer, dropped into the e-mail boxes of subscribers to the famous Canadian magazine *Adbusters* – a critic of the consumer culture. Of course, the ground had also been prepared abroad by increasingly large and virulent socio-economic protests in the Arab world and Israel, the huge demonstrations of the ‘indignados’ (unemployed youths in Spain), the riots in Athens, Rome and even London.

But the mere evocation of the universally despised label of ‘Wall Street’ (as opposed to the universally admired label of ‘Silicon Valley’, for instance) seemed to be the final salient detail that triggered the emotional epidemic.

Just as the label of the heroic rebellion of the ‘Tea Party’ during the independence struggle had earlier attracted conservatives to the opposite side of the political spectrum

2 **Occupy:** Based on the first month of almost daily reporting in the *IHT*.

in the United States. Such viruses seem to spread faster and wider, in this hyper-connected age. For better and for worse.³

THE EMERGENCE OF A GIANT NETWORK BRAIN

Now let us look elsewhere for hints at what is changing throughout the world and what the new opportunities are. Most Russian oligarchs had struck gold by buying up profitable state property at fire-sale prices, through nepotism and corruption – during the chaotic years when Boris Yeltsin had dissolved the Soviet Union and tried to kick-start a market economy. But that was not the source of Yuri Milner's wealth, who became a new type of billionaire for an entirely new age.

He was the son of Jewish intellectuals, a brilliant student of theoretical physics at Moscow state university. But after the Berlin Wall fell, he saw entirely new opportunities in finance, and thus decided to change track. The first non-refugee Russian student to do an MBA at the famous Wharton School of Business in Philadelphia, Milner took up a job at the World Bank in Washington, before becoming head of investment at the private Russian Menatep Bank.

The 1990s had seen the rapid rise of the Internet throughout the developed Western world. Just before the turn of the millennium, he saw a report by an analyst at the Morgan Stanley investment bank, predicting that the next stage would be its rapid expansion throughout the major emerging markets – later grouped together as the BRIC countries (for Brazil, Russia, India and China). An S was later often added (for South Africa).

So Milner founded a company to buy up and develop Russian copies of Hotmail, Amazon, E-bay and their like. He then took his Digital Sky Technologies or DST group to the United States, and became a visionary early buyer of key stakes in dotcom blockbusters Facebook, Groupon, Spotify, Twitter, Zynga and others. Today, he is an 'angel investor' in other promising start-ups, moving aggressively into China and the rest of Asia.

He had a hundred million dollar second home built in Silicon Valley – one of the most expensive American mansions in history. He is married to a striking high-fashion model turned mobile phone artist, and has two children with her. But he remains hyperactive and is hopping on and off planes half of the year.

He has also become one of the most influential gurus on the further growth of the World Wide Web. For instance, during a presentation in Yalta – a kind of Eastern European equivalent of the similar annual meeting in Davos, where top policy makers

3 **Poll:** *IHT*, 26 October 2011. **Inequality:** In line with my 2010 Dutch book *Mad with money*, I published a column on the disquieting income disparities in a Dutch financial quarterly just before the movement started, in the spring of 2011. It also discussed new data from a provocative book by Cambridge economist Ha-Joon Chang.

and business tycoons rub shoulders. A global editor of the Reuters news agency moderated at the event, and reported on the views he outlined.

Milner repeated that ‘The Internet revolution is the fastest economic change humans have experienced, and it is accelerating’ – as 2 billion people were already online, and over the next decade this number was expected to double further. Five billion devices were already connected, and over the next decade this number was expected to quadruple further. He claimed the amount of information created between the dawn of time and only a few years ago equalled . . . the amount of information created in merely two days today, and in only one hour a decade from now.

The Internet is thus becoming the ultimate *medium* par excellence. Also because of its revolutionary new capacity of mass individualization. As Google fine-tunes its results in relation to your own earlier personal searches, and Amazon recommends books related to those you ordered before. In conclusion, he predicted ‘the emergence of a global brain, which consists of all the humans connected to each other and to the machine, and interacting in a very unique and profound way. Creating an intelligence that does not belong to any single human being or a computer’.

A report by the International Telecommunications Union said that Internet access through fixed lines was now exceeded by wireless connections. Whereas people used to be online only when working behind their desk computers, the ‘wandering web’ is now alive 24/7, through mobile devices such as tablets and smart phones. This trend has recently accelerated further.⁴

THE WANDERING WEB AND THE TABLET CRAZE

A university professor of Medieval Literature compared it to Gutenberg’s introduction of print, no less, which had also revolutionized the cultural history of the world. He was talking about the introduction of the tablet computer. Smaller than a laptop, so that it could be held with one hand and operated with the other.

Larger than a smart phone, so that it could display all existing media contents, from magazines to movies. But also a hub with immediate access to administrative instructions and work forms – the ultimate handheld workstation. My thirteen-year-old son operates the touch screen with musical scores and lyrics on the ground before him with his toes, while learning to play the guitar with his hands.

The device is so intuitive that even complete computer illiterates like myself can easily learn how to operate it, within mere minutes. With endless wonders, like that of thumb and index finger moving towards or away from each other: creating a ‘zoom in’ or ‘zoom out’ effect.

4 **Quotes:** C. Freeland. (23 September 2011). The advent of a global intelligence. *IHT*. Also: 30 September 2011. **Profile:** P. Olson. (10 March 2011). A day in the life of Yuri Milner, Web billionaire. *Forbes*, and Wikipedia. **Internet:** Anderson (2008).

Onlookers prove invariably fascinated, and often respond with a fascinated ‘Wonna see, wonna do, wonna have!’ This ‘more emotional than intellectual’ appeal of the object also made it ‘the fastest-selling gadget in the history of electronics’, according to one insider. The craze sold half a million within a week and twenty-five million within only fourteen months, tipping the company’s annual revenue over the hundred billion-dollar mark.

The press noted it was the umpteenth time Steve Jobs and Apple had jump-started an entirely new product category. So journalists asked whether he had done a lot of market research. ‘None’, he replied dryly. As ‘it isn’t the consumers’ job . . . to know what they want’. The prototypes and refinements had initially not even been shown to ‘focus’ test groups, as key decisions were based on the purely instinctive ‘gut feelings’ of himself and his team.

They did periodically visit the nearby Apple store, though, to get an even better grasp of unrecognized consumer desires, technology trends and popular culture. ‘These are seeing-around-the-corner innovations’, *The New York Times* quoted one expert as saying. ‘He’s a cool guy, and he designs cool products’, said another. ‘It’s a real art, not a science’, a third concurred. The paper concluded that he was typically a leader, not a manager.

His true breakthrough had come with the shift from computers to consumer electronics, and the introduction of a range of extremely well-designed and entirely new products and versions: the iPod music device that developed into a versatile audio-video player; the iPhone that developed Internet access and video calling; and the iPad that developed into the ultimate handheld multimedia platform.

These ‘Cool Three’ broke all previous sales records and boosted computer and software sales. During this initial period, its iOS operating system was said to run on almost 45 per cent of all mobile devices in the world, of any brand. At 350 billion dollars, Apple became the most-valued company ever; repeatedly voted ‘most admired’ with the highest ‘customer satisfaction’ by consumers around the world – who tended to consider it a ‘family’ rather than a ‘corporation’. The online app-store soon carried three hundred thousand third-party software applications. Others made billions in just developing thousands of . . . fancy accessories such as leather cases for the sleek hardware products.

The iPad ruled supreme for several years, as it initially sold 80 per cent of all tablets. New applications ranged from games for lonely cats (see YouTube) to easy navigational tools for private planes and multibillionaire super-yachts. Apple even chose to stay away from the nerdy ‘must visit’ Consumer Electronics Show, which featured no less than . . . eighty-five clones by competitors, most of which failed to catch on – except the almost equally sophisticated Korean Samsung products.

After Steve Jobs died from cancer, he was widely hailed as the Leonardo da Vinci of our age. Fans held vigils in front of Apple stores, holding up iPads displaying . . . lighted candles.⁵

5 **Apple**, key details and quotes: D. Pogue (10 March 2011). With nips and tucks, iPad is transformed. *IHT*. S. Lohr. (20 January 2011). Imagining Apple without its visionary. *IHT*. Also see: 21 February, 26, 27–28 August 2011.

THE WISDOM AND THE FOLLY OF CROWDS

Whenever a big news story hits today, many users will immediately receive a red alert on their mobile device connected to the wandering Web – over a war threat, political scandal, market unrest, product recall, popular uprising, star trouble. Large segments of the public will soon begin to scour the Web for some additional information: for a further ‘first definition’ of the event and its possible impact. And also for the first spectacular sounds and images – often available live through Web radio and Web television.

A wave of raw emotion ripples through the ‘global village’ on such occasions, usually settling into some kind of mood change with regard to a major issue: military, political, financial, economic, social, leisure, whatever. These contagious epidemics increasingly rule public debate, kicking managers and policymakers into overdrive every other week or month. But their communication experts are ill-equipped to understand the true dynamics of such hypes and scares, let alone to anticipate them. And the volatility continues to grow.

But this also creates the unique situation that most future citizens of the world may have the entire knowledge of mankind . . . immediately at their fingertips. For instance, through the Wikipedia online encyclopaedia with almost 4 million items in English, and available in more than fifty other languages as well – updated every day and every hour.

Google has ever larger numbers of books and articles, maps and videos online for free. Citizens can continuously choose and ‘vote’ in myriad different ways: from buying or downloading stuff to merely talking or tweeting about subjects online. We will return to this subject in the last chapter of this book, and to the new technique of automated ‘sentiment analysis’ of large swaths of exchanges on the Web.

A long string of recent bestsellers have shown that all this is contributing to the emergence of an entirely new society and an entirely new economy, with more room for minorities and more balanced possibilities for collective decision-making. Familiar titles range from *The wisdom of crowds* to *The power of swarms*. If a large number of people make a difficult appraisal independently of each other, so an old observation goes, many of them may be wrong. But their average judgment will usually provide the best approximation available. This is also the principle underlying free markets and free elections.

But the hype tells only one side of the story – because if, for some reason, large numbers of people do not make judgements independently of each other, then clichés and gross misperceptions may easily spread and come to dominate: whether over-optimistic or over-pessimistic. This is often accompanied by emotional or mood contagion, and that is what this book is about. Because there is also *The folly of crowds*, as opposed to the wisdom of crowds, a slight variation to the title of a classic on *Extraordinary popular delusions and the madness of crowds* by Charles Mackay dating back to . . . a full century and a half before the emergence of the mobile Web.

So emotional contagion can be very direct and primitive, in everyday face-to-face situations. Nothing new about that. What is new is that it is increasingly affecting the whole of

society, continually and everywhere. National and world sports championships or Olympic Games are good examples, as they show an enthusiasm virus spreading epidemically throughout each country, sometimes followed by grave disappointment. Every month or week also sees a hype about a new blockbuster movie or television format, bestseller book or pop music top hit – like the campy summer 2012 hit Gangnam style, by a South Korean artist calling himself Psy. Punctuated by the occasional mass mourning for a glamorous global star who died tragically, like Michael Jackson.

Meanwhile, the enthusiasm of the economic boom years of the 1990s and subsequent ‘naughties’ have turned into the demoralization of the credit and debt crises. The upward spiral seems to have reached a tipping point, where the simple printing of extra money did not suffice anymore. It thus turned into a downward spiral – through an equally self-reinforcing movement and mood contagion, for instance in the Euro zone. Would it be possible to stem or turn this tide?

Mass strikes suddenly emptied factories and mass demonstrations filled the streets, insurrectionary riots set shopping centres in glorious capitals ablaze, from Athens to London. The two main political parties in Washington are torn between liberal and conservative wings, meanwhile, and election outcomes like those in 2012 became increasingly unpredictable. Hurricanes and episodes of extreme weather (like ‘Sandy’ on the Atlantic coast) further feed the debate about global warming and the call for alternative energy sources. An earthquake and tsunami in Fukushima (the year before) had meanwhile led to major Western countries giving up nuclear industry altogether. Such tragic disasters are followed by charity rallies in turn, where people may prove surprisingly generous.

Strange abbreviations like H1N1 virus or EHEC bacterium do suddenly look familiar, DSK for Dominique Strauss-Kahn or NOTW for *News of the world*, labels like ‘the Chilean miners’, or ‘the Jasmine revolution’ or ‘the Oslo massacre’. Emotional pandemics continually send ripples and waves all over the earth’s surface. Public life has become an emotional roller-coaster, with policymakers and managers running from crisis deliberations to emergency meetings.⁶

MOOD CONTAGION, MIND QUAKES AND MENTAL TSUNAMIS

In the traditional approach to public opinion, it is said that in the aforementioned cases peoples ‘opinions’ have suddenly changed. The whole body of opinions that are made public (as opposed to those that may remain private) is called ‘public opinion’. Some people are pro, others are con, still others are neutral on any issue (‘no opinion, don’t know’).

6 **Wisdom:** Surowiecki (2005). **Swarms:** Van Ginneken (2009), Fischer (2009). **Tipping point:** Gladwell (2000).