

Weak Ties, Modern Epidemics, and World Society¹

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Thirty years ago, the May 1973 issue of "The American Journal of Sociology" published Mark S. Granovetter's seminal ideas on "The Strength of Weak Ties" (Granovetter, 1973). This article — with over 1,300 citations in other articles alone for the last eight years (Social Science Citation Index) — emphasizes the often underestimated prominence of weak interconnections between human beings.

Weak ties — defamatory, you could also call them superficial — deserve in the individual's view an investment of less time, less emotion and less intimacy than strong ties. Further on reciprocity is not strongly pronounced either.

Strong interconnections between two friends or relatives bring about overlapping social networks or friendship circles: "My best friend's friend is my friend, too". Weak ties on the other hand can serve as bridges between cliques that are composed of strong ties. If they are cut, then important pathways for flows of information are suddenly out of service or at least information takes much longer than before to travel from one point to the other.

Because of their long range, weak ties can get you through to more people much faster than strong ties. Possibly it could even turn out to be much more difficult to organize a wedding-party with your relatives and close friends than a large mass-demonstration against war in Iraq.

But the strength of weak ties means much more.

The global spread of the infectious disease Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) within week shows the humongously grown integration of world society – an integration based to a large part on said weak ties. The different structural patterns of world society – Rudolf Stichweh calls them "Eigenstructures" (Stichweh, 2003) – like function systems, formal organizations, epistemic communities, networks, markets and world events exhibit a strong affinity to weak ties: Function systems, for example science, economy, religion and so on, rely on keeping the private out and letting impersonal

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media speak. Akin to function systems, formal organizations include an employee's professional know-how and eight hours of work a day but not his or her relatives and acquaintances (Luhmann, 2000). Epistemic communities are as powerful as they are because they are not constrained by social and spatial co-presence and follow universal norms and ethics (Haas, 1992). The strength of networks and the "space of flows" (Castells, 2000) lies in the large number of geographically spread individuals that can interact without meeting in person. Markets on the other hand emerge from interpolating the quality of an Other, for example your competitor, from the sparse information you can accrue (White, 1981). Finally, world events such as world exhibitions or world fairs are being staged to include as many spectators as possible and therefore cannot care for the closeness of their audience's relations.

My point is, that world society based on strong ties would limit the spread of diseases because close friends share a large number of their acquaintances. Thus each new infection adds only a relatively small number of further possibilities or branches for the virus to spread.

In contrast to this, when sneaking through weak ties, the virus crosses a bridge with every new infection and can reach whole new cliques time and again. The only way to contain this spread seems to be turning weak ties into strong ones. House arrest, isolation and restrictions on free travel – epidemics in modern world society paradoxically require a step back in time to the traditional, closely-knit "Gemeinschaft".

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