A number of contradictory metaphors are interwoven with network culture. Perhaps the most striking is the computer scientist Tim Berners-Lee’s image of a spider’s web, which is used to represent the open interstices of communication, but also raises questions about network vulnerability. For example, is being on the web tantamount to the experience of a spider or a fly? Indeed, the World Wide Web was preceded by a host of Internet creepy crawlies: namely, the viruses and worms, which surfaced as a threat to the culture of sharing in the 1980s. The viral metaphor was keenly implemented by early computer security researchers who made fairly close, but often crude, analogical comparisons between digital viruses and their biological counterparts, as well as drawing on immunology to inspire a business of viral containment.

The dangers of too much connectivity

As Robert Peckham argues in relation to the global interdependencies revealed by financial crises since the 1990s, over the last three decades a paradigm shift has taken place: a shift away from a culture of free sharing towards a culture in which proliferating connectivity has given rise to new anxieties about infection. As the age of networks mutated into the age of contagion, the metaphor of virulent infection turned out to be a perfect justificatory device for an indiscriminate security paradigm. While diverse and conflicting interests, including those of marketers and anti-capitalist groups, sought to harness the ‘positive’ viral potential of this network, too much connectivity was deemed to be harmful. The purported danger posed by excessive connectivity provided a rational for organizing and exerting control over a network via, for instance, the application of epidemiological models of disease emergence in the social sphere, but also via the widespread imposition of generalized immunological defenses, anomaly detection and the obligation of personal hygiene.

My own work in this area began by asking if we can look beyond these ubiquitous biomedical metaphors of viral infectivity to locate a different kind of contagious property inherent in the physics of network culture itself. Might it be possible, in other words, to redirect theoretical discussion away from conventional biomedical analogies that have dominated discussion of the viral media ecology towards a new understanding of the ‘virality’ of communication? Here, my approach overlaps with Peckham’s critique of contagion theory in economics. While pervasive biomedical analogies have shaped (and constrained) popular discourses surrounding the networked nature of the contemporary media—fueling fears and propelling an ‘antivirus’ industry—the problem of too much connectivity readily dissipates into a transcendent comparison that fails to grasp the specific material relations of network culture. In contrast, ‘virality’ might be understood, not in terms of a divisive pseudo-biological threat that comes from without to disrupt, but as a quality intrinsic to contemporary network culture, where different forms of ‘contagia’—biological and cultural, human and non-human—interact: from trivial video virals and so-called ‘memes’ to more sobering ‘outbreaks’ of financial and emotional contagion.

Rethinking the ‘virality’ of networks

Conceived as an analytical resource, ‘virality’ enables us to move beyond neo-Darwinian theories to develop novel ways of thinking about the complex interactions spawned by network culture. While Peckham identifies the shortcomings of biomedically orientated analogical thinking, it is surely important to go further and offer alternative frameworks for viewing contemporary ‘contagious’ phenomena.

To recuperate virality in this way is to understand contagion as a sociological event in which subjectivities are assembled through interactions with a multitude of competing actors and influences in a network. The theories developed by the sociologist Gabriel Tarde in relation to crowd behaviour...
provide a starting point for such thinking, as does the notion of ‘social assemblage’ formulated by the philosopher Gilles Deleuze. Tarde, who took an interest in the dynamics of financial booms and busts at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, refused to separate the psychological and the biological from the wider social and material world. His focus was on examining the small-scale psychological and social interactions between individuals that lead to collective behaviour through subconscious or semi-conscious imitation.

According to such a view, the viral world of the network is a space where social, psychological and biological phenomena are folded together; a space that Nigel Thrift refers to as a continuous ‘generation of neurophysiological ecosystems’. The network is awash with hormones, neurochemicals, consumer goods and politics; making people happy or sad, angry, sympathetic, empathic, and apathetic. It is a space in which affects are significantly passed on, via suggestions made by others, more and more through networks. Whereas Durkheim envisioned a social body composed of collective representations, this virality is a sub-representational flow of mostly unconscious associations that spread in an infectious desire event. It is this deterritorialized flow of events that assembles social wholes.

Virality also raises significant questions about Deleuze’s ‘control society’. In times of revolutionary contagion, political instability and crisis, how much of happenstance virality can be guided, and how can the spreading of belief be stabilized, ordered, fixed or kept in one place? As was the case in the early days of network security, the answer may perhaps be found in a broader analogical immune system designed to do more than merely catch viruses. This is after all how the organizational tendencies of analogical thinking have been used to control networks by forcibly bringing singularities into unified relation with each other. But the answer is just as likely to correspond with a Tardean trajectory apparent in a late capitalism geared, as it is, towards studying how small, unpredictable events can be nudged into becoming big, monstrous contagions without a guiding hand. In fact, the knowledge gained from studying these capricious spillovers of contagious desire is helping the business enterprise, and possibly the political activist, consider new triggers for virality.

References