

THE NETWORK EFFECT AND THE PANDEMIC CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Ever wonder why only a limited number of networks like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Tiktok can remain popular among hundreds of social networks? Or why the aforementioned social networks are not directly competitors with each other, but each one stands out in a different field?

Let us explain this puzzle with an example: You are traveling on a highway and you are very hungry. There are diners on both sides of the road. The one on the left is a bit shabby, but many trucks are parked in front of that diner, while the other does not even have a single customer. Which one would you prefer?

In the early years of the invention of telephone, if only a few people found this device useful to use, it would be very difficult for this invention to spread worldwide. Established by Graham Bell 135 years ago, A&T emphasizes the importance of this situation in its 1908 annual report:

“A telephone-without a connection at the other end of the line-is not even a toy or a scientific instrument. It is one of the most useless things in the world. Its value depends on the connection with the other telephone - and increases with the number of connections.” [1]

This fact was named as “Network Effect” in the following years. In its simplest form, the network effect implies that “the value of a good or service rises as the number of people using that good or service increases”. In other words, “new subscribers joining a network increase the utility of current subscribers.”[2]

If we know what network impact is, then we can realize why the most important capital of popular social networks is their users. The more users a social network has, the faster it grows; the bigger a social network, the more users join it. Hence, it is very difficult for newly established alternative networks to compete with mainstream social networks such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, which already became monopoly in different areas.

The network effect not only adds strength to the power of mainstream social networks, but also facilitates the dissemination of disinformation by those who use those networks effectively.

Interestingly, the conspiracy theories initiated against the drugs and vaccinations, used in the treatment and prevention of COVID-19 spreads from the social networks thanks to network effect.

Sadly, disinformation sources use social networks quite effectively, managing to deceive their victims with convincing false evidence. Scientists though simply prefer criticizing the people who believe conspiracy theories rather than fighting with conspiracy theories and refute sources of disinformation with scientific facts. For example, some scientists are contented with making unconvincing, superficial and upside-down statements such as “these theories are quite stupid, only fools can believe in such disinformation, and the public should not go beyond the suggestions of scientists.”

However, the explanation individuals need to hear is not that conspiracy theories are stupid, but why they are not correct. Because, these conspiracy theories, which were previously only shared on social networks, have now become serious in practice. An important number of individuals now seriously believe that vaccines are not safe or that they were developed to destroy the human race and establish a new world order. This situation proves us that not real information but information that can persuade people are effective in social networks.

The solution? Accurate, complete and timely information flow from its source to the target audience in a simple form, of course!

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