The Strength of Weak Ties

The principal idea underlying the diffusion of innovation is that information and influence tend to spread through close, deep connections. If we have an effect on people we do not know, it is because we take advantage of a series of strong ties. Like dominoes falling one by one, we can spread information to, or influence the behavior of, the next person, and that person does so in turn.

However, this idea neglects an important feature of human social networks. As we discussed in chapter 1, we tend to be clustered in tightly knit groups. Take any two of your friends at random, and the chance they are friends with each other is higher than 50 percent. As a result, the series of strong ties through which we might influence others is not like dominoes. Ties do not extend outward in straight lines like spokes on a wheel. Instead, these paths double back on themselves and spiral around like a tangled pile of spaghetti, weaving in and out of other paths that rarely ever leave the plate.

While this structure is good for reaching everyone in your group, and even for reinforcing your own behavior via feedback loops, it is very bad for reaching people outside the group. Stanford sociologist Mark Granovetter was one of the first people to recognize this difference. Others had dismissed “weak ties” and casual acquaintances as irrelevant to the spread of information. But Granovetter argued that these weaker connections frequently act as bridges from one group to another and therefore play a critical role. Strong ties may bind individuals together into groups, but weak ties bind groups together into the larger society and are crucial for the spread of information about the benefits of using latrines, the availability of good piano teachers, the existence of valuable information in other inventions, and much else besides.

Granovetter used a simple economic study to prove his point. He surveyed several technical, managerial, and professional workers in a Boston suburb who had recently relied on a personal contact to get a new job, and he asked them a simple question: “Prior to switching employers, how often did you see the person who helped you get the new job?” He found that only 17 percent responded “often,” while 55 percent said “occasionally”; the remaining 28 percent said “rarely.” Most workers found jobs via old college friends, past workmates, or previous employers. Contact with the person was sporadic, and very few had ever spent time with the contact outside the workplace. According to Granovetter: “Usually, such ties had not even been very strong when first forged.... Chance meetings or mutual friends operated to reanimate such ties. It is remarkable that people receive crucial information from individuals whose existence they have forgotten.” In other words, most of his subjects had acquired their jobs by (nearly) relying on the kindness of strangers. These were distant friends or friends of friends who passed their names to an employer or who passed information about jobs to the prospective employee. People find jobs, in other words, in much the same way...
that they find sexual partners (as we saw in chapter 3)—by searching their social network beyond their immediate ties.

Weak ties are thus a rich source of new information that we tap when we are trying to improve our lot. And we seem to do this intuitively, even though we do not know the structure of our own network or consciously think about the problem in the way Granovetter proposed. In fact, people frequently rely on weak ties to search large networks for useful information, as the study of global e-mail forwarding outlined in chapter 1 showed. People frequently relied on socially distant friends to accomplish this task. Since information flows freely within a close circle of friends, it is likely that people know more or less everything that their close friends know. Therefore, your immediate relatives and friends, for instance, would be unlikely to know something you do not about how to reach a person in Indonesia. But move socially farther away, and there is less overlap in experience and information. We might trust socially distant people less, but the information and contacts they have may be intrinsically more valuable because we cannot access them ourselves.

One implication of this is that people who have many weak ties will be frequently sought out for advice or offered opportunities in exchange for their information or access. In other words, people who act as bridges between groups can become central to the overall network and so are more likely to be rewarded financially and otherwise.

The other implication is that we sometimes leapfrog over the natural boundaries of the network when we are intentionally trying to search it for information and opportunities. The flow of influence may stop at three degrees, but it appears that we often start our search for information two or three degrees away in order to make sure we are learning something new. We do this in everyday life, whether searching for a job, an idea, or a new piano teacher, and it is this region in the network, just beyond our social horizon, that has a critical impact on our own economic fortunes.