



Zeitgeist: Fluke, Complexity, & Going Viral

Can you go viral on purpose? What makes something impactful? In the complex system of public opinion, is there any guaranteed path to fame? Does internet sharing enable a meritocracy, or not? What composes the zeitgeist, and who decides?

Zeitgeist, according to m-w.com:

/ˈtsiːˌɡɪst, ˈzɪtˌɡɪst/ (noun) the general intellectual, moral, and cultural climate of an era from the German words Zeit, meaning "time," and Geist, meaning "spirit" or "ghost."

We will kick off the discussion by (1) getting with a partner and sharing the first viral video that you remember, and (2) as a group, watching this viral video where comedian Avalon Penrose explained the viral Reddit-driven Gamestop stock surge in 2021: <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2021-01-28/stock-market-game-stop-reddit-best-funniest-tweets>

Anything is fair game for discussion, but here are a few excerpts of suggested reading to get us started:

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In this 2021 Forbes article, the author offers advice for marketers and brand managers:

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2021/04/14/the-subtle-equation-behind-going-viral/?sh=7c1a35c75b85>

"You can't make a social media epidemic happen; it's a unique blend of the right content dropping at the right time and getting noticed by the right people at the very start. There is a way, though, to put the odds of going viral in your favor.

...Companies and brands do not go viral—content does... Viral content isn't something that you can brainstorm and plan and have months' worth of meetings over to bring to life. It's responsive, triggered and released at a specific time, whether it's concurrent with real-world events or at the tipping point of a trend going mainstream. For the best chance at creating a social media epidemic with your content, you need a finger on the pulse of your industry and a team capable enough to get high-quality content turned around in a very short time."

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In this (now ancient) 2012 article, a finance writer touches on chaos theory, complexity theory, and critical states to describe the complexity of financial markets—not that we’re really going to delve into the mysteries of the economy, but the article provides a pretty good primer on complexity theory:

<https://www.financialsense.com/contributors/david-galland/complexity-theory-sand-piles-financial-crises>

“Imagine, Buchanan says, dropping one grain of sand after another onto a table. A pile soon develops. Eventually, just one grain starts an avalanche. Most of the time it is a small one, but sometimes it builds on itself and it seems like one whole side of the pile slides down to the bottom.

...Thus, they asked themselves, could this phenomenon show up elsewhere? In the earth’s crust, triggering earthquakes, or as wholesale changes in an ecosystem - or as a stock market crash? Could the special organization of the critical state explain why the world at large seems so susceptible to unpredictable upheavals? Could it help us understand not just earthquakes, but why cartoons in a third-rate paper in Denmark could cause worldwide riots? (*See various articles about 2005 riots following the publication of cartoon depictions of the Prophet Muhammad in Denmark’s Jyllands-Posten newspaper.*)

... after the pile evolves into a critical state, many grains rest just on the verge of tumbling, and these grains link up into ‘fingers of instability’ of all possible lengths... So the chain reaction triggered by a single grain might lead to an avalanche of any size whatsoever, depending on whether that grain fell on a short, intermediate, or long finger of instability... Relating this to [our economy], the longer that a critical state builds up in an economy, or in other words, the more ‘fingers of instability’ that are allowed to develop a connection to other fingers of instability, the greater the potential for a serious ‘avalanche.’”

And maybe we’ll conclude our discussion by brainstorming an end to this story:

The Allegory of the Famous Chicken Sisters


Once upon a time, four chicken sisters lived in a coop. They were named Lucky, Plucky, Skilled, and Strategic. One night, they were talking about what qualities a chicken needs to be famous.

Lucky said, “You have to be lucky. Life is random, and we can’t control outcomes. So just stay ready and hope for your big break.”

Plucky said, “You have to be bold. If there’s something you want, you have to go get it. Nothing is just gonna land in your lap.”

Skilled said: “You have to be good. Merit will be recognized. People want to spread the word about worthwhile things.”

Strategic said, “You have to be attentive. Read the room, and then change your attitude or offering accordingly. Discernment is the key to success.”

 ← *What happens to the chicken sisters? Do any of them succeed in their quest to become famous?*