

## The ecology of memes

Written by

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The "ecology of memes" refers to the concept that Memes, or ideas, are much like Genes (or viruses) in how they spread and replicate, in summary that they:

- Replicate - copied from host to host (human brains)
- That as they replicate they mutate and change
- That they breed - combine with other memes.
- That natural selection and evolution naturally produce memes that live well and spread widely through their human hosts.

Personally I'm fascinated by this because of its relevance to how key concepts - like recycling - spread through a population and become well established. It seems that Memes have a number of characteristics that influence how widely they proliferate. Including:

- Infectiousness: How easily they spread from one person to another, adaptations for this include:

- Transmissability: How easy it is to communicate an idea - This includes such things as

- Compressability: Can the idea be communicated in a few words (or bytes), this includes

- Symbology: Does the meme use understood symbols, or does it require communication in longhand.

- Incrementality: Does the meme easily build upon component memes that the recipient already has, or do those memes have to be as well.

- Understandability: How easy it is for the recipient to receive it. This includes things such as

- Simplicity: complex memes are harder to understand

- Memorability: How long is it likely to stay within a carrier, this includes:

- many of the same things as Infectiousness, especially Symbology and Incrementality.

- Refreshability: Does the meme refresh itself in memory because it is triggered by other things in the environment.

- Teaming: Does the meme naturally build teams of people who continue to

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communicate it to each other

- Feelings: Does the meme interact with human emotions
- Immortality: Does the meme outlast individual carriers.
- Independence from originator.
- Adaptability:
- Integrity - the opposite
- Assimilatability - assimilating other memes
- Exclusivity - excluding other ideas
- Parasitology - attach to other memes, so carried by them, this includes the concept of memes banding together into cultures or societies.
- Crutch - make itself crucial to another meme which will then support it.
- Symbiosis - finding another meme which it can support

Of course, the summary above doesn't do justice to the idea, and I'm no expert. So below are some useful links.

- Richard Dawkins coined the idea, back in '93 or thereabouts in a paper "Dawkins R. 1993. Viruses of the Mind. P. 13-27, in: Dennett and his Critics, Blackwell Publishers." If there is an online version, I'd love a reference.
- [The Journal of Memetics](#) - subtitle "Evolutionary Models of Information Transmission" has pages of [Overview/History](#) , [Links](#) , the [Memetics Mailing list](#) ,
- and a [good list of papers](#) , in which the following papers caught my eye, though I haven't read them yet (24Sept98), feel to ask me for comments on which were good at a later date.
- Adam Westoby developed the idea into a long paper: [The Ecology of Intentions: How to make Memes and Influence People: Culturology](#)
- [The New Style of War -- a Struggle among Memes](#) : David Brin .
- [Memes Meta-Memes and Politics](#) By H. Keith Henson