IN PRAISE OF COPYING

Copying, originality, invention, innovation and the King of Rock ‘n’ Roll
WELCOME TO ELVISLAND

Few events on the planet capture our mixed-up and confused feelings about copying better than the annual Elvies festival, held each October in an unprepossessing purpose-built holiday resort outside the seaside town of Porthcawl in wet and windy south Wales. The Elvies is the world’s largest such gathering devoted to His Presleyness (it has a daily attendance only slightly lower than the much cooler and well-funded Burning Man Festival). Over the course of one autumnal weekend, out where the brown-grey waves of the Bristol Channel meet the post-industrial landscape of the Welsh coast, more than 100 acts strut their stuff – shake their hips and curl their lips – and present their impersonations of the one and only – The King.

In 2012 the Elvies achieved something particularly special: it witnessed the largest ever recorded gathering of Elvis impersonators doing their snake-hipped best, rather rowdily singing along to ‘Hound Dog’ (smashing the record held by a Nike US sales conference some two years previously).

Elvies organizer Peter Phillips noted, ‘We had all sorts of different Elvises aged from three to 80 and from the UK, Ireland, Germany, Malta and even Brazil. They were wearing all manner of Elvis costumes from gold lamé jackets, to leather jump suits and GI uniforms.’ (Although, if the photographic evidence is anything to go by, the predominance of rather paunchy Vegas Elvises says something about the festival’s demographic.)

1-2-3-4: off they go – jumping, gyrating, shaking, uh-huh-ing and vairmuch-ing.

COPYCATTING AN ORIGINAL

On the surface, the Elvies is a celebration of copying – of impersonations of the great man whom we all acknowledge as one of the great innovators. The man Mick Jagger dubbed ‘a unique artist – an original in an area of imitators’.

“The Elvies is a celebration of copying.”
As with most Elvis-related events, the majority of people seem happy with the kind of mimicry on show – no-one is actually seriously pretending to be Elvis even if they’ve got his moves down to a ‘t’. Nobody’s deluding themselves or anyone else – apart from the ‘guy [who] works down the chipshop [who] swears he’s Elvis’, as the song has it.

Some of the Elvies of course are more Elvis-y than others: some have more of the voice, some have more of the looks or the costume or the legs. And for those that don’t really have any of these things, the weakness of their impersonation is taken in good spirit. Good and bad copying seem to be equally well-received: accurate and inaccurate turns alike. Fat Elvis or thin Elvis, young (and there are some very young Elvies – young enough to be great grandchildren of his Uh-Huhness) or old Elvis. Every Elvis is good in Elvisland.

Even if that great Welsh Elvis-a-like, Michael ‘Shaky’ Barrett (AKA ‘Shaking Stevens’) – were to stumble in and run through any one of his 33 (!) UK Top 40 Elvis-style singles, still we’d all be happy: while he still appears and moves like Truck Driver Elvis, we know and he knows and we know he knows his copying is not meant as a bad thing but as an ‘homage’ or something similar.

But beyond all this happy copying of different degrees of faithfulness, on another level, nobody seems to want to mention the fact that the object of all this copying – the Original, the King himself – wasn’t perhaps quite as, well … original as all that.

“**The King himself – wasn’t perhaps as original as all that.**”

**ELVIS-A-LIKE**

Let’s start with his handle – the Elvis name is no one-off, no ‘moonunit’ neologism (the name Frank Zappa famously gave his son).

Indeed, the name Elvis has a long and honourable past: it is an anglicized version of the name of a real 6th-Century Celtic bishop, Saint Ailbe (alternative spellings include Ailbhe, Elfeis, Ailfyw, Ailvyw, Elveis, Albeus), who supposedly baptized the patron saint of Wales, St David. The abandoned ruins of the church of St Elvis don’t sit outside Memphis, Tennessee, nor just off the strip in Vegas, but in a farm on the cold wet hillside about 4 miles east of the city which bears the name of Wales’ Patron Saint, looking out towards Ireland, where *that* Elvis lived. His mother’s name is undeniably Welsh (Gladys); his surname too seems to be of local origin: the North Pembrokeshire *Preseli* (sic) Hills run some 13 miles from Dinas Island to Crymych through what is now the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park. Although, as is so often the case, the geographical origins of the family’s name are not something
that the owners are aware of – a name is just a name after all, even if it is handed down over many generations.

“Elvis was and remains a covers artist.”

Nor was the music Elvis made all that new: it was a mix of the stew of RnB and Blues and Gospel and such like he heard near Memphis’ Beale Street where he had his first (truck driving) job; the songs all covers, not originals, including tracks from The King’s early Sun Sessions like That’s All Right, Mama by Arthur ‘Big Boy’ Crudup and Blue Moon of Kentucky, a 1947 hit for Bill Monroe and his Bluegrass boys. While in later years, his management attempted to secure co-writing credits for the songs the man recorded, Elvis was and remains a covers artist – not some auteur, singer-song-writer or inventor, singing the songs of his heart and his own creation but someone who sang the songs of someone else. As any amateur musician will tell you, there’s a world of difference between the status of those who ‘write their own material’ and ‘covers bands’.

‘Real’ musicians, we imagine, create their own music, write their own tunes and their own lyrics; by contrast we consider ‘cover’ artists as musical freeloaders – not talented enough to do their own thing. It’s worth noting that this is both a passing idea (for much of the history of the music industry, it has been as much if not more the performance of a song that matters – the product of the interpreter’s rather than the songwriter’s efforts and skills’) and one dependent on the cultural context (the notion of the ‘auteur’ performer and the singer songwriter flourished particularly in the latter part of the 20th Century).

Of course, there are cover artists and then there are cover artists – the local wedding band are not a patch on Elvis, surely? Even my band, the Mighty Big Shorts, are a covers band. It makes us feel slightly better – when faced with the disdain of proper muso’s moonlighting as sound-engineers – to recall that The King often sang other people’s songs better than the composers could do so themselves (even if the same cannot strictly be said of our shows).

“Even Elvis’ famously shocking cover of Hound Dog was stolen from a local band.”

But even Presley’s iconic covers of other people’s tunes were often not his own: his version a copy of other’s covers. His rendition of Hound Dog is seen by many as his breakthrough number but it was not fresh out of the box – the Leiber and Stoller song had already been a genre hit for blues singer Willie Mae ‘Big Mama’ Thornton. Thornton’s version created such a splash that it spawned a handful of country-style covers and a bizarre selection of ‘response’ and spoof records (including ‘Bearcat’ with re-written lyrics by Sun’s own Sam Phillips).

Elvis’ shocking, highly sexualized version made him a national phenomenon when he played the Milton Berle
Show in NBC-TV on 5 June 1956. While the first 90 seconds of the tune were performed uptempo, the final minute was what got the nation’s parents uptight:

‘sloowing the pace, Elvis bent the mike toward him and performed a series of slow pelvic thrusts … the sexual symbolism was all too obvious’

But this, too, was copied from a local band, Freddie Bell and the Bellboys, whom Elvis and his band saw in Vegas. ‘When we heard them perform that night, we thought the song would be a good one for us to do as comic relief when we were on stage. We loved the way they did it’, noted guitarist Scotty Moore. So what did they do? They copied it.

You could say that the distinctive sound that Elvis brought out of the original Sun Sessions in July 1954 was the product of an accident rather than a deliberate ‘invention’ too: when Elvis, Scotty Moore and Bill Black were playing around with That’s All Right, Mama, playing it at double speed and so on, producer Sam Phillips stopped them and asked, ‘What are you doing?’ ‘We don’t know’, they said. Phillips had found the sound he was looking for. ‘Back up and do it again’, came the voice from the control room. Copy, copy, copy.

Elvis’ look throughout his career was shaped by Lansky’s interpretation of the style of Memphis hoodlums of the times – from the peg-trousers and two-tone shoes of the Sun Studios era to the jumpsuits of later years, including the white suit and blue tie in which Elvis was buried. ‘I put his first suit on him and his last suit on him’ Lansky said.

And yet to most of us, Elvis remains The Original, The King, The One and Only.

His looks, his interpretations and his performances and the story of his sad, lonely death unique and unrepeatable (except by all those Elvis impersonators). Elvis remains both original and copy.

“Elvis remains both original and copy.”

Original and copy: two things that don’t go together. Like Superman and Kryptonite. Or oil and water. Or so you might like to think.
COPYING IS CHEATING

There are few things our culture esteems more than novelty and originality; few it despises more than copying.

On the one hand, we love new things, new ideas, new solutions, new news, original and authentic things. Let’s have some new ideas, rather than revisit the old ones. Politicians need to have new answers not (unless they are of a particular nostalgic bent or unaware of their own thinking) recycle old ones. This is why politics in the developed world is awash with ‘thinktanks’, to think up those new ideas; and with lobbyists and special advisors, to help provide the politicians with the ideas they don’t have time to have (just so long as they don’t appear to have been borrowed from anyone in particular).

And we love the heroic originals and the unique individuals who we think make these fresh new ideas: the Elveis and the Newtons, the Picassos and the Pullmans, the Brailsfords and his heroic bicycling protégés.

By contrast, copying feels wrong in a number of ways. For many in modern business, copying is theft, plain and simple. Jonathan Ives, the designer behind Apple’s iPod, iPhone and iPad, puts it this way in complaining of his imitators: ‘What’s copied isn’t just a design, it’s thousands and thousands of hours of struggle. It takes years of investment, years of pain.’

Big business’s lawyers love finding ways to protect their clients’ intellectual property, to stop other businesses copying their ideas and sunk costs. The London Olympics Organizing Committee even tried to copyright the words ‘2012’, ‘Olympic’ and ‘London’. It made economic sense to try – imagine how much the city of Paris could have earned on ‘1924’ by now – even if these efforts made LOCOG look a little silly and money-grabbing.

Part of the problem here is the notion of copying as deception: deliberately presenting one thing as if it were another. Passing off somebody else’s thing as if it was mine.

This whiff of the deception involved in copying runs deeper: copying has some more negative tones beyond the economic dimension. If you discover something’s been copied from elsewhere, that thing seems to have less intrinsic value immediately.

“Discovering something is copied makes it seem less valuable.”
So when you read Matt Bateman’s critique of the plot of James Cameron’s movie *Avatar*, it’s hard not to think (even) less of the movie than you did previously. The huge number of similarities to the plot of the very successful Disney movie *Pocahontas* is hard to see as other than deliberate.

Perhaps this is a little unfair – after all, Bateman’s plot synopsis of the two movies is written in such a way as to highlight the similarities between the two movies. He might just as easily have mentioned movies such as *Dances with Wolves* or even Kurasawa’s *The Seven Samurai* as source material – both feature an outsider who comes to make friends with natives and ends up winning their confidence and taking the side against his own exploitative people. The New Zealand children’s animated cartoon, *Fern Gully*, is visually even closer to *Avatar*: it features blue-skinned natives in a dense and inhospitable forest for the hero to make friends with.

“There is no shame in copying good stories.”
To the anthropologist there is no shame in copying good stories: Joseph Campbell famously showed how the original Star Wars series of the 1970s and 1980s had its roots in classical mythology—plot motifs that have been favourites since Little Red Riding Hood, which is thousands of years old, as anthropologist Jamie Tehrani of Durham University has recently shown. Some details may vary but essentials are the same. For example, the Irish Snow White is called Lasair Gheug. In this version of the story, it is a little trout, rather than a mirror, who repeatedly tells the Evil Queen stepmother that she is not the most beautiful woman that ever was in Ireland. It is still essentially the same story.

But to my mind even knowing that there are these story archetypes doesn’t make the feeling of less go away, really. It’s disappointing when you learn that a particular thing isn’t as unique and special as you thought it was.

“We don’t like copycats...at all.”

When it comes to people who copy, that is when the confused feelings around copying start to become even clearer. We don’t like copiers, at all.

I grew up preventing my school friends copying my work by judicious use of an extended arm and elbow (while simultaneously peering as well as I could at their answers).

Today’s technology makes it much easier for students to copy the work of others. Indeed, many educationalists underline the importance of group- and peer-learning as methods to drive up learning in any group of students. At the same time, academics and schoolteachers have both had to find text-checking software to check for plagiarism (or ‘cut-and-paste’ writing, to be precise) in work submitted by students.

Similar tools and the ‘wisdom of crowds’, which digital media facilitates, make it hard for journalists and writers to get away with copying others’ work as much as perhaps they used to, though some continue to persevere nobly—in journalism, the New York Times’ Maureen Dowd and the Toronto Globe and Mail’s Margaret Wente have been at the centre of just two high profile cases of recent years. Indeed, while former Wired journalist and author Jonah Lehrer has admitted to fabricating interview quotes to make a better story (proper faking), I’m amused by the accusation thrown at him that he has self-plagiarized not just once but no less than 13 times in various pieces.

‘The more instances of duplicity we discover, the more it seems Lehrer devalues originality – the very thing we turn to him for. Had he stolen words from someone else – plagiarized-plagiarized rather than self-plagiarized – we’d all be calling it quits.’
THE REAL JOE BIDEN

Senator (now vice president) Joe Biden’s first run for the democratic presidential nomination fell apart in 1987 when newspapers started to circulate rumours that Biden was a ‘copier’: a high-profile and very well received speech he gave bore very strong resemblances to one given earlier that year by Neil Kinnock, then leader of the British Labour Party, about opportunity and social mobility. Here are the relevant portions of the two speeches:

‘Why am I the first Kinnock in a thousand generations to be able to get to university? Was it because our predecessors were thick? Does anybody really think that they didn’t get what we had because they didn’t have the talent or the strength or the endurance or the commitment? Of course not. It was because there was no platform upon which they could stand.’

‘Why is it that Joe Biden is the first in his family ever to go to a university? [Then pointing to his wife in the audience] Why is it that my wife who is sitting out there in the audience is the first in her family to ever go to college? Is it because our fathers and mothers were not bright? Is it because I’m the first Biden in a thousand generations to get a college and a graduate degree that I was smarter than the rest?’

While Biden had frequently cited Kinnock as his source elsewhere, on two public occasions at least he failed to do so – the 21 August Democratic Debate at the Iowa State Fair and in an interview on 26 August for the National Education Association. This gave the impression to some that he was trying to pass off someone else’s ideas as his own – a notion reinforced by the discovery that he’d previously quoted large chunks of Robert F. Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey without crediting them.
ME, MYSELF AND I

Part of our discomfort here is, I think, rooted in the sense of the other party deceiving us – consciously or otherwise – but I suspect that there’s something else going on.

Our culture has a very strong individualist strand: we prize the individual over the group and distrust those who don’t have a strong sense of authentic self, who don’t ‘know their own mind’, ‘self-actualize’, ‘sing their own song’ or whatever metaphor is popular down the dark self-help aisle in the bookstore.

We are discomforted by the conformist and the copier who lack this authentic (for good or ill) core:

- Chameleon characters like Woody Allen’s Zelig, who literally absorbed the physical and behavioural characteristics of those he spent time with, Nazi leaders included.
- Those who abide too closely by the rules of high school (teenage rebellion, yay!) or suburban country club (or union or whatever).
- Those who toe the party line too often – in politics or in the world more generally.
- Those who are easily led and those with weak wills or lack or self-confidence – all of these we look down on …

Our culture places a strong injunctive on individuals to be themselves. Those who don’t are somehow failing. Oscar Wilde is the poster-boy for this when he suggests that:

‘most people are other people: their thoughts someone else’s opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation’.

Individual identity and self-determination are central tenets of our contemporary culture. ‘Just be yourself’ the bumper sticker cries, ‘Everyone else is taken’.

‘WE’ FICTION IS SCARY

Our fictions reveal the depth of this individualism and our dislike of those without a central core of self. This is where our love of heroes and villains is rooted – in some ways, we’d prefer it if people were genuinely good or bad – life would be much simpler. It’s also why our stories of innovation are about the unusual and inventive individuals like Elvis and Newton, rather than the broader team involved in making new things.

We find the ‘single white female’ of the movie of the same name shocking – she copies the hair, dress and interests of her roommate, tries to steal her boyfriend by pretending to be the girl and then finally plots murder. Other fictions, such as The Stepford Wives, Doctor Who’s Daleks and Cybermen and the Midwich Cuckoos and the plague of zombie stories
that we’re currently surrounded by, reveal quite how deep this fear about the lack of authentic individualism goes. When Gene Roddenberry’s team were seeking a new mortal enemy for the all-American individualists on the Starship Enterprise, they specifically chose the Borg as the polar opposite: a Hive-Mind without a sense of personal self and originality. What could be scarier to mainstream America?

WEIRD

The individualist view of the world sees humanity as a species of ‘individuals … tiny organisms with private lives … personal power, success and fame are the absolute measures of values, the things to live for’. But when you look beyond the limits of Anglo-Saxon and American culture in particular, it’s a point of view that is neither widely shared – though it may seem a self-evident truth to you and I – nor is it fact.

Rather, it is WEIRD, as in ‘Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic’ societies, the acronym coined by Joe Henrich and Ara Norenzyan. More and more social scientists are discovering that WEIRD societies (yes, that means us) are the anomalies in terms of our species across time and cultures. Indeed, it appears we may have been misled in many ways by what we have learned from scientific studies to describe as ‘universal’ human characteristics because the vast majority of psychological experiments and economic games have been conducted on WEIRD subjects like American university students.

Many cross-cultural studies like psychologist Richard Nisbett’s The Geography of Thought demonstrate that the aggressive individualism of Anglo-Saxon culture is not widely shared by other cultures. My own experience of working across non-Anglo Saxon cultures supports this strongly. Southern Africa has its notion of Ubuntu (connectedness and mutuality) which sees man as a fundamentally social being, rather than a ‘host of individual entities that cannot help being in constant conflict’. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu famously put it:

‘my humanity is caught up and inextricably bound up in yours. A person with Ubuntu [has] a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that they belong in a greater whole and are diminished when others are humiliated or diminished.’

"The vast majority of psychological experiments and economic games have been conducted on WEIRD subjects."
Swahili-speaking East Africa has the notion of Kiva which means much the same as Ubuntu. ‘Us-together’ not ‘me and mine’.

Latin cultures, too, are more ‘we’ than ‘me’. An evening spent in a small Italian or Spanish town will underline the centrality of peers and family to Latin life. It is almost unthinkable for young Italians to go out on their own or small groups; the ‘passegiata’ parade around the local square is something everyone indulges in, especially on holidays. Italian business often progresses by getting to know each other and their families over dinner (which often leaves Anglo Saxons feeling lost in gastronomic foreplay). When pitching a project its you, who you know and how you are connected to them matters intensely as a mark of suitability in these ‘we’ cultures.

French Professor Bernard Cova and his collaborators have gone so far as to identify what they call the ‘Latin School of Societing’ which contrasts strongly with the Anglo Saxon me-me-me culture through which most of us in marketing and the behavioural sciences swim (whether or not we were brought up in ‘me’ or ‘we’ culture, we learn ‘me’ as we learn those disciplines and their practices).

Cova also highlights the strong ‘we’ bias of other – more northerly – European cultures. For example, while the rest of us may tend to characterize Sweden’s world view in terms of its social democratic politics (one version of more ‘we’ than ‘me’), the culture itself has deeper ‘we’ roots, with longstanding social norms for moderation and not standing out from the average, which precede modern political structures and ethos. The word ‘lagom’ for example – often translated as ‘just the right amount’ or ‘moderate’ – is a turnkey word which opens up this central notion in Swedish culture. To Swedes, at least. To the Finns, ‘sopiva’ has a similar meaning. Even to the Australians, whom comparative cultural studies often describe as located on the individualist scale halfway between the British Anglo-Saxons and their more extreme North American cousins, ‘we-ness’ often overruns ‘me-ness’. Anyone in Oz who presents themselves as a ‘tall poppy’ – thinking themselves better in some way from their peers – deserves to be cut down. By contrast, mate-dom – being a good bloke in the company of others – is one of the highest things an Ozzie man can aspire to.

The point here is twofold: first, the individualist ‘me’ world view is far from universal – indeed most cultures do not share it. Second, these kinds of cultural assumption (axiom, maybe?) are hard to see around. Often they are so embedded in a place, a group or a discipline (e.g. psychology) that they just seem to be how things are. And this can hide the value and importance of phenomena like copying which is anathema to a particular worldview. If the world is made up individuals, their lone efforts and their special talents and characteristics, how can copying – using the brains of others – ever be good?
COPYING IS GOOD FOR YOU (AND ME)

Copying (or ‘social learning’ as the behavioural sciences have long called it) turns out to be one of our species’ greatest gifts and one of the factors most responsible for our success.

It starts really early: as early as 42 minutes old, as Professor Andrew Meltzoff’s milestone research demonstrated. Meltzoff’s experimental technique was simple:

- Hold a selected baby in your arms, look into its eyes.
- Make a clear facial gesture at the baby – by, say, sticking out your tongue or opening your mouth wide.
- Observe the baby’s reactions and record them.

When repeated many times over – both for human infants across different cultures and for the offspring of our closest simian cousins – this disconcertingly simple methodology created some powerful learning:

- We copy earlier.
- We copy better.
- We go on copying long after the initial buzz has gone and without reward.

If you have children yourself you know the truth of the great central importance of copying as THE learning style in human infants (they repeat the colourful language we use at home that we’d prefer no-one else – grandparent or teacher – to know about).

First they copy us, then their peers, then the media, then …

I’LL HAVE WHAT SHE’S HAVING

Sadly it doesn’t stop at puberty (if only!). We grown-ups also use copying widely. Not least in the names we choose to give our children: my late mother always insisted that I was named ‘Mark’ after the thousands of times she had typed the words ‘Deutschmark’ and ‘trademark’ while pregnant with me (she was working as a translator at the time); however, it turns out that I am part of a cohort of British men whose parents all followed the short-lived fashion for ‘Mark’.

"We copy the choices and the behaviours of those around us."

When faced with difficult situations or choices that are hard to tell apart, each of us outsources the cognitive load to those around us – we copy the choices and the behaviours of those around us. Whether it’s in restaurants and bars (as demonstrated in that scene from When Harry Met Sally\(^\text{23}\)), in voting booths, in the music we listen to, where we choose to live and the products we choose in the grocery store, we default to ‘I’ll have what she’s having’ more often than we’d imagine. Indeed, as the midterm review of the work of the UK Government’s Behavioural Insights Team (the so-called ‘nudge’ unit) demonstrated, the biggest influence on an individual’s behaviour (beyond what they’ve done previously) is what other people do and say.

For individual decision-makers, copying remains a pretty decent tactic for many situations, for many behaviours and for many choices.

NEUROLOGICALLY EFFICIENT

Moreover, I’ll have what she’s having’ is pretty darn efficient, too. The kind of thinking that involves an individual in a considered weighing of options and calculating of probabilities is neurologically thirsty: it’s slow and cumbersome because it soaking up a lot of processing power. And as a result, we often default to heuristics – like ‘what I did last time’ (copying your past self) or ‘what everyone else is doing’ (copying what’s being done by others right now).

Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman\(^\text{24}\) describes this considered style as ‘System 2 thinking’ – propositional, logic- and fact-based. By contrast, ‘System 1 thinking’ is much faster because it uses short-hands like ‘what I did before’, ‘what everyone else is doing’ and so on (indeed the ratio of processing speeds of the two kinds of approach has been calculated at 1:220). Human beings are to System 2 thinking, he says, like cats are to swimming – we can do it if we really have to but, like our feline friends, we will tend to avoid having to do it if we can.
Copying is incredibly useful – it’s quick, it’s easy and it gets results.

No wonder then that ‘copying’ is so prevalent in human behaviour and seems to have been for as long as we have been human. Cognitive scientist Alex Mesoudi and anthropologist-archaeologist Michael O’Brien created an ingenious experiment, in which participants played a computer game of making spear-points designed to hunt bison. The participants were allowed to change aspects of the shape of the stone points – length, width, edge angles and so forth – and then see how well their point would perform (based on archaeological knowledge) on hunting actual bison. After each round, these ‘hunters’ could see their own scores in comparison with the scores and different designs that others were hunting with. Each hunter could invent new shapes, or copy others whose hunting-success scores they could see. In all runs of the game, social learners scored better than those who refused to copy others’ success.

Work by other social scientists points in much the same direction: for example, in the software-based tournament created by Kevin Laland and his team at St Andrews University, in which they were able to simulate the effect of large numbers of individuals (represented by a simple piece of code) interacting with each other of many iterations.

Laland and colleagues expected the winner would have a sophisticated ‘social learning strategy’ about whom and when to copy. Mere random copying was not seen as likely to win, ‘because information may be wrong, and can become outdated’. The winners, in as much a surprise to themselves as to the expert panel overseeing the tournament, were two Canadian post-grads Dan Cownden (a neuroscientist) and Tim Lillicrap (a mathematician), neither of whom were social learning experts. They labelled their entry ‘discount machine’ – its basic instruction being to copy often, and to bias that copying towards recent successful strategies – ‘discounting’ the older information. It was not quite random copying, but close – copy any success, just as long as it is recent.

Copying then is incredibly useful to individuals in their immediate decision-context – it’s quick, it’s easy and it gets results. But it has much more important advantages for individuals, larger populations and the species as a whole.

WE-THINK

Any population of a social species like ours, who have the ability of individuals to learn (copy) from those around them, has a number of advantages over one in which copying is not so developed. It allows individuals to outsource all kinds of cognitive activity to those around them. From where the food is, to what’s good to eat, who’s
important and who’s not, whether danger is emerging and how you get those yummy ants out of a log (or whatever).

Think of it this way: together – at a family party or reunion – we remember better than most of us can on our own. Copying is central to this ability to access the minds of others. Or in a football crowd, even with your eyes shut, you can tell when a goal has been scored, from the screaming and movement of all those around you.

"Copying is central to our ability to access the minds of others."

PHONE A FRIEND

Copying, however, does something even more fantastic – it provides us with a knowledge and know-how bank that makes independent thought even less necessary in our everyday lives. Something we call ‘culture’.

Take, for example, the way you (and most people who’ve grown up in European culture) tend to lay food out on individual plates: three kinds of thing, taking up roughly equal space – protein, carbohydrate and something called ‘vegetables’. This is far from an obvious arrangement – indeed, many other cultures have a very different way of sorting food out. Italian meals can often pull out the carbs to a separate course and Indian ‘thalis’ are shared dishes which sit between those eating together rather than in front of an individual. Nor is the current status quo fixed: we Northern Europeans have had very different arrangements in the past. For example, until the 18th Century the idea of cutlery was distinctly underdeveloped – the knife playing the same singular role it had already played for millennia. The fork by contrast arrived in France from Italy with Catherine de Medici in the 1540s and only became commonplace across the continent and in Britain in the 18th Century.

Flavour preferences and styles of cooking have also changed over time. Two generations ago it would have been inconceivable that Britain’s most popular dish was an Indian curry (chicken tikka masala) or that one of the fastest growing food styles of the last decade would be raw fish (sushi). These are clearly behaviours that we have learned from those who learned from others who are now long gone: copying connects not just one individual to another but on and on over space and – importantly – over time.

Copying allows us to build this kind of coherent web of connections and store knowledge, information and know-how in them – which is what ‘culture’ really is. To phone a friend, if you like (even if they are a long time dead). The software community gets this – the fact that individual coders’ work available to others enables more robust and interoperable code to be deployed more quickly. Why DIY?
iSPREAD

Copying is thus a central to how information, ideas and behaviour spread through populations. The modern world is full of examples: technology enables copying to happen at the press of a button and at the same time can often provide us with the means to track and understand it.

Take for example a simple news story: on the I-75, outside Monroe, Ohio, is the Solid Rock Church, long known to locals as ‘the church of Touchdown Jesus’ due to the unmissable (to anyone on the I-75) 62 ft tall, 16000 pound Styrofoam and fibreglass stature of Our Good Lord in a pose which makes it appear as if he’s scored in the final seconds of the Superbowl.

On Monday June 14th 2010, however, the statue was struck by lightning. People – gossipy godless people like myself – love this kind of story. The nascent social platform, twitter, captured instantly how the news spread (as the graph shows). First, we see a spike of mentions that grows very rapidly and then declines, then subsequently a smoother and rounder growth.

‘King of Kings’ image by Joe Shlabotnik, reproduced under Creative Commons licence https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/
How to interpret this? Classic diffusion science is a big help in making sense of the twitter data (see Classic Diffusion Curves graph below). The spiky asymmetric curve on the left indicates that people here are acting independently (and in the case of Touchdown Jesus in response to the same external stimulus, the local news media). The rounder curve on the right (which you may recognize from Marketing 101 as a classic adoption curve) suggests that individuals are responding to other individuals – copying – rather than to the news story itself. And while the left hand ‘independent’ curve seems to reach much higher (many more people), it’s the area under the curves we should compare – the right hand curve has more than 10x the people involved.

Similar patterns are clear from a study of all kinds of media content – how from articles in The Economist get popular, the success of movie and video game releases to the simple blog post or an embarrassing faux pas on twitter or Facebook which our politicians seem to love sharing with us. Put simply, if something doesn’t have the copying – the social diffusion curve – it doesn’t spread.

We see the same thing in the fads and ‘memes’ that dominate much of the online social world: in spread of the fun stuff (videos of babies or cats) and of the serious (#jesuischarlie and #yeswecan). And of course, the same thing is true (and has always been true) offline too. How do names become more or less popular, if not by copying? How did tennis pros develop the habit of the fist pump before and after every point? And everyone else who plays the game down on their local park courts?

However, copying doesn’t just spread new things; it can also keep things the same and do so for surprisingly long periods. For example, the Neolithic longhouse was the product of hundreds of years of tight copying, with only the very occasional accident (or ‘innovation’ as Neolithic architects might call it) to create variation. Sometimes this
is due to functional characteristics (the basic design worked pretty damn well) but more often it is because it becomes ‘what we do round here’ – a cultural practice that goes unquestioned.

What’s more, a novel idea often takes a long time to get widely adopted – as it often has to replace something else. You’d be very lucky to find evidence of the transition from roundhouse to longhouse. This happened very slowly over tens of generations and at different speeds in different parts of Europe. This point will turn out to be important when you try and spread new behaviours or choices later on in the book: copying can also bolster the status quo and keep things as they are. That said, the modern world gives us so much access to so many other people (both in our immediate networks and beyond) that it can’t help but fuel the creation of novelty.

So even when something new does arise, its spread is often largely due to copying of one sort or another. Or indeed its failure to spread is due to the population copying some other behaviour.

Ask yourself this: how did you ever buy this book? Or join twitter or Facebook? Or learn the jargon of your workplace? Or the slang of your peers? Or get your name? Or Elvis get his and I get mine?

• Copying is a really central part of what it is to be human.
• Copying helps us to make decisions quickly, easily and neurologically efficiently. And good ones at that, most of the time.
• Copying helps us navigate the broader world by using the brains and bodies of others – both those in front of us and those just beyond them; on out over space and time.
• Copying helps us learn new ideas and pass them on to our neighbours and their neighbours and so on.
• Copying is such an amazing and fundamentally human skill.

Yet, our Anglo-Saxon culture is blinded to the value of copying:

• We stigmatize it.
• We dislike it.
• We hide it and deny it.

But we don’t have to – most humans on the planet and most humans who’ve ever lived, are perfectly at ease with copying, if done well (or badly, as we’ll see). Elvis was. His tailor was. The team at the Elvies are. I am.

Want to learn how to use copying to make new stuff? Discover some more practical tools and approaches? Uncover some more ‘how’ and little less ‘why’? That’s the next chapter.