How do ideas spread? What messages will go viral on social media, and can this be predicted?

UCLA psychologists have taken a significant step toward answering these questions, identifying for the first time the brain regions associated with the successful spread of ideas, often called “buzz.”

The research has a broad range of implications, the study authors say, and could lead to more effective public health campaigns, more persuasive advertisements and better ways for teachers to communicate with students.

“Our study suggests that people are regularly attuned to how the things they’re seeing will be useful and interesting, not just to themselves but to other people,” said the study’s senior author, Matthew Lieberman, a UCLA professor of psychology and of psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences and author of the forthcoming book “Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect.”

“We always seem to be on the lookout for who else will find this helpful, amusing or interesting, and our brain data are showing evidence of that. At the first encounter with information, people are already using the brain network involved in thinking about how this can be interesting to other people. We’re wired to want to share information with other people. I think that is a profound statement about the social nature of our minds.”

The study findings are published in the online edition of the journal Psychological Science, with print publication to follow later this summer.

“Before this study, we didn’t know what brain regions were associated with ideas that become contagious, and we didn’t know what regions were associated with being an effective communicator of ideas,” said lead author Emily Falk, who conducted the research as a UCLA doctoral student in Lieberman’s lab and is currently a faculty member at the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School for Communication. “Now we have mapped the brain regions associated with ideas that are likely to be contagious and are associated with being a good ‘idea salesperson.’ In the future, we would like to be able to use these brain maps to forecast what ideas are likely to be successful and who is likely to be effective at spreading them.”

In the first part of the study, 19 UCLA students (average age 21), underwent functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) brain scans at UCLA’s Ahmanson-Lovelace Brain Mapping Center as they saw and heard information about 24 potential television pilot ideas. Among the fictitious pilots — which were presented by a separate group of students — were a show about former beauty-queen mothers who want their daughters to follow in their footsteps; a Spanish soap opera about a young woman and her relationships; a reality show in which contestants travel to countries with harsh environments; a program about teenage vampires and werewolves; and a show about best friends and rivals in a crime family.

The students exposed to these TV pilot ideas were asked to envision themselves as television studio interns who would decide whether or not they would recommend each idea to their “producers.” These students made videotaped assessments of each pilot.
Another group of 79 UCLA undergraduates (average age 21) was asked to act as the "producers." These students watched the interns’ videos assessments of the pilots and then made their own ratings about the pilot ideas based on those assessments.

Lieberman and Falk wanted to learn which brain regions were activated when the interns were first exposed to information they would later pass on to others.

“We’re constantly being exposed to information on Facebook, Twitter and so on,” said Lieberman. “Some of it we pass on, and a lot of it we don’t. Is there something that happens in the moment we first see it — maybe before we even realize we might pass it on — that is different for those things that we will pass on successfully versus those that we won’t?”

It turns out, there is. The psychologists found that the interns who were especially good at persuading the producers showed significantly more activation in a brain region known as the temporoparietal junction, or TPJ, at the time they were first exposed to the pilot ideas they would later recommend.

Source: Science Daily

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