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Peter Sheridan Dodds, Kameron Decker Harris, and Christopher M. Danforth
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Limited Imitation Contagion on Random Networks: Chaos, Universality, and Unpredictability

Peter Sheridan Dodds,†,* Kameron Decker Harris,† and Christopher M. Danforth†‡

†Department of Mathematics & Statistics, Computational Story Lab, Vermont Complex Systems Center, & the Vermont Advanced Computing Core, The University of Vermont, Burlington, VT 05401.
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We study a family of binary state, socially-inspired contagion models which incorporate imitation limited by an aversion to complete conformity. We uncover rich behavior in our models whether operating with either probabilistic or deterministic individual response functions on both dynamic and fixed random networks. In particular, we find significant variation in the limiting behavior of a population’s infected fraction, ranging from steady-state to chaotic. We show that period doubling arises as we increase the average node degree, and that the universality class of this well known route to chaos depends on the interaction structure of random networks rather than the microscopic behavior of individual nodes. We find that increasing the fixedness of the system tends to stabilize the infected fraction, yet disjoint, multiple equilibria are possible depending solely on the choice of the initially infected node.

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The structure and dynamics of real, complex networks remains an open area of great research interest, particularly in the realm of evolutionary processes acting on and within networked systems [1–6]. Here, motivated by considerations of social contagion—the spreading of ideas and behaviors between people through social networks and media—we explore an idealized, binary-state social contagion model in which individuals choose to be like others but only up to a point: they do not want to be like everyone else [7–10]. We term such behavior ‘Limited Imitation Contagion.’ We build naturally on previous studies of threshold models of contagion [11–14], and our model can also be seen as a specific subfamily of dynamical Boolean network models [15, 16]. We show how macroscopic network structure overrides microscopic details, and we find complex dynamics whose character moves from universal and predictable to particular and unpredictable as we allow the system to become increasingly deterministic.

In constructing our model, our main interest is in understanding how spreading by Limited Imitation Contagion on random networks behaves under three main tunable conditions: (1) Social awareness: the rate of contact between individuals; (2) Social variability: the extent to which friendships are fixed; and (3) Social influence: the character of individuals’ responses to the behavior of others.

To begin with, we consider a binary state model for which individuals are either in a base state $S_0$ or an alternate state $S_1$. We assume individuals interact over an uncorrelated random network, which may be dynamic or fixed. For simplicity, and due to the richness of the dynamics we find, we employ standard Erdős-Rényi networks which possess Poisson degree distributions. We take time to be discrete ($t = 0, 1, 2, \ldots$), and we prescribe each node’s degree $k$ at $t=0$. In a dynamic network, when node $i$ updates, it samples the states of its randomly chosen nodes (i.e., the system is a random mixing model with non-uniform contact rates). For a fixed network, node $i$ repeatedly samples the same $k_i$ nodes. We further restrict our attention to single-seed contagion processes wherein all nodes are in state $S_0$ at time $t=0$, with one randomly chosen node in state $S_1$.

The contagion process is manifested through the response functions of individual nodes. We allow nodes to update synchronously, and node $i$’s response function $F_i : [0,1] \mapsto [0,1]$ gives the probability that node $i$ will be in state $S_1$ upon updating, where the argument taken by $F_i$ is the fraction of nodes sampled by node $i$ that are currently in state $S_1$, $\phi_{i,t}$. We investigate two kinds of response functions, probabilistic and deterministic, both of which incorporate the characteristic of the adoption probability growing and then diminishing as the perceived popularity of $S_1$ increases. In Fig. 1A, we show an example of a probabilistic response function, the tent map, which is defined as $T(x) = rx$ for $0 \leq x \leq 1/2$ and $r(1-x)$ for $1/2 \leq x \leq 1$. Here, we consider the $r = 2$ case meaning node $i$ adopts state $S_1$ with probability $T(\phi_{i,t})$. We use the tent map $T_2$ for a number of reasons: (1) As a standard iterative map of the unit interval, the tent map’s dynamics for $r=2$ are both interesting and well understood [17]—it is fully chaotic and its invariant density $\chi$ is uniform on $[0,1]$ ($\chi$ is the long term probability distribution for the values of a map’s iterates); (2) The tent map captures a probabilistic flavor of the adopt-when-novel, drop-when-ubiquitous behavior we aim to model; and (3) We can construct a simple and elegant connection with deterministic contagion processes which we describe next.

In Fig. 1B, we show an example of a deterministic response function which is characterized by ‘on’ and ‘off’ thresholds, $\phi_{on}$ and $\phi_{off}$. Node $i$ will only adopt or remain in state $S_1$ if it perceives the fraction of others in state $S_1$ to lie between its on and off thresholds: $\phi_{on} \leq \phi_{i,t} < \phi_{i,off}$. For these deterministic ‘on-off’ response functions, we
is equivalent to increasing the logistic map’s amplitude parameter $r$, and the system moves along the period-doubling route to chaos.

However, while appearing to belong to the same universality class, the orbit diagrams of the four models differ importantly in detail, most profoundly for the fully deterministic D-F class.

First, we observe that the four systems produce only three distinct orbit diagrams, since for large enough systems, the two random mixing classes P-R and D-R must exhibit the same macroscopic behavior (Figs. 2C and D). For the D-R class, random rewiring overrules the fact of each node having a fixed deterministic response function (for finite systems some evidence of discreteness limits the smoothness of the orbit diagram in Fig. 2D). While we present simulation results only here, we note that we are able to fully address the P-R and D-R models analytically, and we find excellent agreement (see [18] where we explore more general influence maps).

In next considering the fixed network model with probabilistic response functions, P-R, we see in Fig. 2E that the orbit diagram has slightly moved to the right—the bifurcation points now occur for slightly higher values of $k_{\text{avg}}$ relative to the random mixing cases. A robust, discernible vertical striation also appears, with separation between stripes increasing with $k_{\text{avg}}$, for which we do not have an explanation. Thus, making the network fixed appears to induce some modest changes in the dynamics, though we cannot discount finite size effects.

Our final model class, D-F—to whose description we devote the remainder of the paper—is the most structured, and it generates considerably different and intricate behavior. Once the network and set of response functions is realized, the system is now completely deterministic (and irreversible), and we find surprising changes in the system’s behavior at both macroscopic and microscopic scales. In Fig. 2F, we see that the orbit diagram for the D-F model collapses abruptly after several rounds of period doubling, which are themselves relatively compressed in terms of $k_{\text{avg}}$. Our simulations suggest that above an average degree of $k_{\text{avg}} \approx 17$, the macroscopic dynamics always collapse. The inset in Fig. 2F shows estimates of the collapse point for $N=10^3$ up to $N=10^5$, and the asymptotic growth with $\log_{10} N$ strongly suggesting the collapse is real and not a finite size effect. The collapse appears to favor a fixed point macroscopic state, around $\phi=2/3$, which is the fixed point of the tent map $T_2$. However, a closer examination of the D-F class’s potential dynamics reveals a far more subtle story.

In Fig. 3, we summarize the possible dynamics of a lone realized network ($N=10^4$, $k_{\text{avg}}=30$) with a single set of fixed deterministic response functions. We exhaustively ran $N=10^4$ tests of the system’s behavior by separately seeding each individual node. Of these, 7515 contagion events successfully lead to long-term, non-zero infection levels. Figs. 3A–C show partial time series for three system evolutions for the same network, differing only by seed node, and corresponding respectively to the narrow-
est and widest collapses, as measure by the variance of $\chi$, and the longest time to collapse. In each case, the initial dynamics of $\phi$ exhibit a clear period three pattern interspersed with intermittent chaotic dynamics, followed by a sharp collapse to distinct periodic behaviors.

Across all initial seeds, the time to collapse $t_c$ varies greatly, with the extreme example of Fig. 3C collapsing after more than 160,000 time steps and over $1.6 \times 10^5$ individual node updates. In Fig. 3D, we provide the complementary cumulative distribution for collapse times (black squares). The semi-log scale indicates that an exponential decay for $t_c < 10^5$ covers the majority of cases with the longest collapse time clearly a singular outlier. Even after the dynamics collapse, we see that on the order of 10% of all nodes change state in each time step. Surprisingly, we see different distributions for $t_c$ for different individual networks. For example, the grey triangles represent the collapse time distribution for another randomly realized network with $k_{avg}=30$. Again we see an exponential distribution but now with a much steeper decay. Rather than finding one outlier, we see that a set of exceptional dynamics lasts for much longer than the main exponential decay would suggest, with an isolated set distributed around $t_c \simeq 25,000$, and a group ending at around $t_c \simeq 30,000$.

We turn lastly to the behavior after the collapse. We call the post-collapse period of $\phi_t$ the system’s ‘macroperiod’ $T$, and the period of an individual node its ‘microperiod’ $\tau$. Fig. 3E shows the invariant density $\chi$ for all seeds post collapse, ordered by $\chi$’s variance (contagion events that fail are not included). Strikingly, different seeds almost always lead to distinct invariant densities, with an apparent dominance of period $T=2$ behavior (but see below). We also find that the tent map’s fixed point of $x_t^\infty$ (horizontal line in Fig. 3E) is not the center of the invariant densities.

In Figs. 3F and G, we provide complete histograms of all post-collapse microperiods and macroperiods for this particular network (again ignoring failed spreading events). Unlike the collapse time distribution, we see broadly similar distributions for other individual networks. Microperiods such as 1, 2, 4, 12, and 24 form a dominant envelope, and many odd-numbered microperiods are absent. We find that the most common resultant macroperiods are 4, 8, 12, and 24; that a pure macroperiod 2 is relatively rare ($< 0.1\%$); and that the largest observed macroperiod is 240. Again, all of these outcomes are deterministic, depending only on the choice of initial seed.

To conclude, in abstracting from a real world problem, we have constructed a rich, networked-based model of Limited Imitation Contagion that allows us to deeply
explore the effects of manifesting either deterministic or probabilistic microscopic behavior in both network structure and node response in a well-defined fashion. Our findings broadly suggest that increasing the degree of a social system’s microscopic rigidity leads to higher levels of long-term unpredictability at macroscopic scales. Future work could take at least two paths, one directed toward the dynamical systems aspects and the other toward a more realistic empirically supported model. Some natural objectives would be to explain why the collapse occurs for the D-F class; to explore how local properties of seed nodes such as node degree, correlations, and clustering relate to the collapse time and post-collapse dynamics; to test other contagion mechanisms across systems of increasingly fixed microscopic structure; and to examine these Limited Imitation Contagion models on real networks and classes of naturally occurring ones.

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FIG. 3: Comprehensive survey of the possible Limited Imitation Contagion dynamics for a single fixed random network (k_{avg}=30) with its N=10^4 nodes having fixed deterministic response functions. We ran N simulations, activating each node as a single seed and allowed the fully deterministic dynamics to run until collapse. (A-C): Partial time series for three different initial seeds leading to the narrowest and widest post-collapse dynamics (A and B) and the longest collapse time (C). The insets in A, B, and C magnify two cycles of the underlying periodic behavior. (D): Complementary cumulative distribution of collapse times (black squares) compared with an example distribution from another network (gray triangles); (E): Invariant densities, ordered by variance; (F): Histogram of post-collapse microperiod \( \tau \); (G): Histogram of post-collapse macroperiod T.

[10] Our model is distinct from traditional coupled maps [19], having binary rather than continuous node states, and exhibits fundamentally different behavior.


* Electronic address: peter.dodds@uvm.edu
† Electronic address: kameron.harris@uvm.edu
‡ Electronic address: chris.danforth@uvm.edu