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## Look at This Article. It's One of Our Most Popular

*Top-Ten Lists Abound Online, but Following the Herd Can Make You Wonder About the Wisdom of Crowds*

By CARL BIALIK



Popularity is, unfortunately, still all the rage.

The Internet has facilitated an outbreak of popularity contests as online news providers rank the top 10 most-read, -emailed or -commented articles on their home page.

These rankings have become a standard feature on news sites for the last two years, including this newspaper's, and sites continue to expand the features: The New York Times is adding a most-viewed list, Fox News (owned by News Corp., as is the Journal) introduced most-shared this week and a most-commented list is coming to CBSNews.com this month.

These lists are among the byproducts of the Internet's knack for being instantly quantifiable. Purchases on Amazon.com update the online retailer's sales rankings and their people-who-bought-this-also-bought-that recommendations. Yahoo continually updates its top 10 user searches on its home page, and the iTunes Store does the same with its list of top songs.

Using popularity rankings to make decisions, however, has downsides. These online rankings are public, creating a positive-feedback loop. The more popular something becomes, even if just from a random burst of interest, the more likely it is to grow ever more popular. And that has troubling implications about the effects of all sorts of popularity rankings, from bestseller charts to election polls.

Frequently, popularity rankings speak less to the merits of what's being observed and more to the fact that crowds are observing it. In other words, peer pressure. "If you see a crowd around a building, you pop over and see what everyone is looking at," says Jimmy Leach, editorial director for digital at the Independent newspaper in the U.K.

Psychologist Stanley Milgram demonstrated that people pop over even if everyone is looking at nothing, by sending a group of experimenters into the street to stare upwards. With a large enough group of gapers, passersby stopped to stare, too.

A more-recent study demonstrates that popularity in the music world, even unearned, breeds more popularity. Researchers enlisted more than 12,000 volunteers to rate and download songs from among 48 chosen for their relative obscurity. Some of these volunteers were lied to: At a certain stage in the

experiment, popularity rankings for this group were reversed, so the least-downloaded songs were made to appear most-downloaded.

Suddenly, everything changed. The prior No. 1 began making a comeback on the new top dog, but the former No. 47 maintained its comfortable lead on the old No. 2, buoyed by its apparent popularity. Overall, the study showed that popularity is both unstable and malleable.

Deducing merit from popularity "can lead to self-reinforcing snowballs of popularity, which can become decoupled from the underlying reality," says study co-author Matthew Salganik, a Princeton University sociologist. These snowballs can grow much larger than their competitors, leading to winner-take-all markets.

And maybe it doesn't matter so much if the most-deserving entrant wins, whether it's Britney Spears ruling pop, or a gossip item leading a list of most-read news articles. "If we view the role of cultural products as giving us something to talk about, then the most important thing might be that everyone sees the same thing and not what that thing is," Prof. Salganik says.

Other recent studies have quantified the popularity of popularity in other settings. Signs telling guests at a hotel in the Phoenix area that towel reuse was the No. 1 choice among their peers increased the rate of this practice by 34%, compared with other signs with messages stressing the impact on the environment. Arizona State University psychology Prof. Robert Cialdini and colleagues found that rates went even higher when the signs specified that most prior guests in the same room reused towels.

"To the extent you can convince that, not just a lot of people are doing this, but a lot of people like [them] are doing this," you'll get greater buy-in, Prof. Cialdini says.

Another group of researchers demonstrated this with restaurant diners in Beijing. Table cards at Mei Zhou Dong Po, a Szechuan restaurant chain, touting the five most popular items boosted ordering of these items by 13% to 20%, according to a forthcoming paper by a team from Peking University and Duke University. "Part of it is reassurance that something is good and worth buying," says Bill Paul, a restaurant-menu designer.

Calling these items popular is crucial, the researchers found, because other table cards that highlighted five sample items but made no claim on their popularity had little effect on sales. And the diners liked following the pack: "Diners who were exposed to the popularity information treatment are more satisfied," says co-author Hanming Fang, a Duke economist.

That's been a key finding of news sites that are willing to share some of their results with rankings -- it's not just that these articles are highlighted, but that they're being labeled popular, that makes the lists effective. Restaurants would never publicly shame their least-popular items, and few news sites do, but AOL's Digital City has since its debut last September. While the site's most-popular list "usually becomes self-fulfilling," articles designated as least-popular don't get such a bump, says James Fletcher, editor in chief of the site.

The Denver Post's relatively robust most-popular lists, which include subrankings for Denver suburbs and arrows signifying which stories on the charts are climbing or falling, account for 3% to 5% of clicks on denverpost.com, according to the site's senior developer, Joe Murphy.

At Yahoo News, the various popularity rankings drive 10% of all traffic to articles, according to Mark Walker, region business leader for Yahoo News, which started publishing such rankings in 2000, well before most of its peers. "What began for Yahoo News as one engineer's way of exposing interesting

consumer data and insight has now become industry standard for news outlets everywhere," Mr. Walker says. "The lists enable users to shape news in real time and provide a filter for mainstream journalism."

Users are shaping news by voting up popular-culture coverage and gossip on many sites. "Celebrities, sex and anything Jon Stewart-related" rise quickly to the top of the list at the news-aggregator Newser, according to Chief Executive Patrick Spain. "This is at odds with what people tell us about what they want in their news -- serious, important stories," Mr. Spain says.

Perpetuating the popularity of relatively frivolous news -- or of unworthy bands, or Kung Pao chicken -- isn't a grave crime. But these suggest how unearned popularity numbers may be unduly influencing people in weightier choices, such as for presidential candidates. Political scientists have often noted that polling numbers, particularly early in the race, can create a feedback loops as leaders gain press coverage and credibility, which widens the gap in polls.

Popularity should never be confused with importance. "If you've written horrific stories of downtrodden people in Afghanistan, and those get battered by a story about a piece of battery-operated equipment, it can be quite dispiriting," says Mr. Leach of the Independent.

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