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Bursts: The Hidden Pattern Behind Everything We Do

The Hidden Pattern Behind
Everything We Do



Albert-László Barabási
Author of *LINKED*



Synopsis

The bestselling author of *Linked* returns with a ground breaking new theory that will enthrall fans of *The Tipping Point*. Can we scientifically predict our future? It's a mystery that has nagged scientists for perhaps thousand of years. Now Albert-László Barabási-the award-winning author of the sleeper hit *Linked*- explains how the digital age has yielded a massive, previously unavailable data set that proves the daily pattern of human activity isn't random, it's "bursty." We work and fight and play in short flourishes of activity followed by next to nothing. Compellingly illustrated with the account of a bloody medieval crusade in sixteenth-century Transylvania and the modern tale of a contemporary artist hunted by the FBI, *Bursts* reveals that we are far more predictable than we like to think. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

I thought Albert-László Barabási's first book, *Linked: How Everything Is Connected to Everything Else and What It Means*, was excellent (see my 4/18/10 review), so I looked forward to reading *Bursts* with great anticipation, hoping that he was going update us on all the interesting things he learned in the intervening 8 years (especially related to biomedicine and cancer). Instead, having just finished *Bursts*, it's hard to convey how disappointed I am. While *Linked* presented plenty of solid and useful science in an appealing format, *Bursts* has minimal scientific content and I learned almost nothing. The only significant idea Barabási presents is that the time-spacing of many events in the natural and artificial worlds follows a power law distribution, which means that events have

some tendency to cluster into "bursts," although very widely spaced events can also occur, since power laws have "long tails" rather than dropping off exponentially (as Barabási himself acknowledges in passing, "bursts" is a somewhat misleading term, since power law distributions are continuous, not dichotomous). But Barabási doesn't offer much explanation for the ubiquity of these power laws, nor does he offer useful insights regarding their implications. He does try to argue that awareness of these power laws will eventually enable precise prediction of human behavior, but this is simultaneously both obvious and wrong (and it's telling that Barabási appears to be unaware of the seminal work of Quetelet on this topic).

Here in the Bronx there is a street scam called three-card monte. A person skillfully manipulates three cards, moving them around on a makeshift table, usually the bottom of a large, upside down cardboard box. The object of the game is to pick the ace among the three cards, after the scammer comes to a full stop and lays the three cards face down. To lure an innocent victim, the shuffler has two or three partners stand around the box, pretending to play. One of the partners will then "guess" the right card, and the shuffler will "pay" him or her \$20 for the win. Naive innocent onlookers will then play and lose their bet as the skilled shuffler will do whatever trick it is he does to ensure that the victim does not win. All along during the shuffling the victims are flashed for an instant a view of the ace, which then disappears, never to resurface after the victim makes his or her choice. Reading *Bursts* felt something like being taken at a three card monte game. The author jumps back and forth between a convoluted, though admittedly interesting, historical episode in Hungary, and then back to studies and analysis done about different behavioral phenomena, like the way people use their cell phones, or respond to email or correspondence, or how dollar bills circulate, and then back to the Hungarian episode, and then back to the research, and now we hop back to a story about a Muslim surnamed individual who seems to be an exception to the author's findings, back to the history, back to more research, and on and on. The ace among the cards is Barabási's claim that people tend to behave in "bursty" ways, that is doing some things intensively over a short period of time, and then doing nothing or very little of that thing for a long time.

The author was born in Transylvania and would like us to know all about the 16th century battle of Koloszvar, where his "heroic" ancestor, Lenard Barlabasi, led a bunch of well-armed knights in a massacre of mostly poor peasants who were trying to bring a new order to greater Hungary. Since only about 3 people in the world care about this obscure corner of Transylvanian history, Barabasi has to come up with some excuse for a theme that would find readers for his genealogical

excursion, so he recycles the 30-year old issue attention cycle to pretend he has some new theory about "the hidden pattern behind everything we do." The excuse to bring in Transylvania is a pronouncement by another Hungarian councilor, Istvan Telegdi, who supposedly predicted the whole sequence of events that led to the Koloszar battle beforehand. Barabasi pretends to want to know how it is that Telegdi could have predicted the events that led to Koloszar when supposedly humans behave randomly. It turns out that a newly elected and power-hungry de Medici Pope, Leo X, wanted to keep a Hungarian papal challenger at bay and came up with the idea of a peasant Crusade to retake Constantinople in order to have an excuse to get the challenger out of Rome, leading to a whole cascade of events that ended up at Koloszar with Hungarians slaughtering one another. Of course recruiting peasants in April for a Crusade before the harvest would not sit well with the knights they worked for, and encouraging peasants to fight instead of the knights whose whole excuse for a privileged societal position was their supposed availability for Crusades like this one was a recipe for disaster.

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