## The Economist 12/17/11 - Social media in the 16th Century - How Luther went viralIT IS a familiar-sounding tale: after decades of simmering discontent a new form of media gives opponents of an authoritarian regime a way to express their views, register their solidarity and co-ordinate their actions. The protesters' message spreads virally through social networks, making it impossible to suppress and highlighting the extent of public support for revolution. The combination of improved publishing technology and social networks is a catalyst for social change where previous efforts had failed.

## That's what happened in the Arab spring. It's also what happened during the Reformation, nearly 500 years ago, when Martin Luther and his allies took the new media of their day—pamphlets, ballads and woodcuts—and circulated them through social networks to promote their message of religious reform….

Now the internet offers a new perspective on this long-running debate, namely that the important factor was not the printing press itself (which had been around since the 1450s), but the wider system of media sharing along social networks—what is called “social media” today. Luther…grasped the dynamics of this new media environment very quickly, and saw how it could spread his message.

The media environment that Luther had shown himself so adept at managing had much in common with today's online ecosystem of blogs, social networks and discussion threads. It was a decentralised system whose participants took care of distribution, deciding collectively which messages to amplify through sharing and recommendation. Modern media theorists refer to participants in such systems as a “networked public”, rather than an “audience”, since they do more than just consume information. Luther would pass the text of a new pamphlet to a friendly printer (no money changed hands) and then wait for it to ripple through the network of printing centres across Germany.

Unlike larger books, which took weeks or months to produce, a pamphlet could be printed in a day or two. Copies of the initial edition, which cost about the same as a chicken, would first spread throughout the town where it was printed. Luther's sympathisers recommended it to their friends. Booksellers promoted it and itinerant colporteurs hawked it. Travelling merchants, traders and preachers would then carry copies to other towns, and if they sparked sufficient interest, local printers would quickly produce their own editions, in batches of 1,000 or so, in the hope of cashing in on the buzz. A popular pamphlet would thus spread quickly without its author's involvement.

As with “Likes” and retweets today, the number of reprints serves as an indicator of a given item's popularity. Luther's pamphlets were the most sought after; a contemporary remarked that they “were not so much sold as seized”. His first pamphlet written in German, the “Sermon on Indulgences and Grace”, was reprinted 14 times in 1518 alone, in print runs of at least 1,000 copies each time. Of the 6,000 different pamphlets that were published in German-speaking lands between 1520 and 1526, some 1,700 were editions of a few dozen works by Luther. In all, some 6m-7m pamphlets were printed in the first decade of the Reformation, more than a quarter of them Luther's.