

# The decline of David and Mary: New inventiveness driving the diversification of popular culture

February 20 2012

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Inventiveness in the naming of babies in the United States suddenly increased in the late 1980s, having changed little during the previous hundred years. A new study from the Universities of Bristol and Durham considers what this tells us about the competing forces at work in popular culture: globalization and local innovation.

Professor Alex Bentley and Professor Paul Ormerod analyzed naming trends in the US over the past 130 years. They found that while parents in the early 1900s chose from only a few thousand different [names](#), by 2009 that number had grown to tens of thousands. The variety of names given to children increased markedly in the past fifty years.

Using a statistical model, the researchers showed how these new levels of invention foster cultural differences across the country. When inventiveness was still low in 1960, Mary was the most popular girls' names in most US states, and David or James was the most popular boys' name. By 2009, when inventiveness had tripled, this homogeneity was broken up considerably. The dominance of Mary gave way to a patchwork of multiple competing girls' names and the geography of boys' names became even more diverse with over a dozen different boys' names being the most popular in different US states.

The study addresses the paradox of why differences persist in an era of [globalization](#). Naming practices reflect ubiquitous copying in human social behaviour. Still, original independent invention of names persists among less than ten per cent of a population. This persistent minority of independent inventors injects new variation for those in the majority to copy.

The research showed that small increases in the inventive minority can strongly amplify the differences that emerge between states in terms of what becomes most popular. By 2009, for example, the most popular boys' names in the Midwestern state of Minnesota – Logan – wasn't even in the top 30 in the coastal states of California and New Jersey.

The researchers found that naming inventiveness has risen dramatically in just the past generation. The speed of innovation accelerated substantially from the late 1980s, increasing the geographic diversity of names across the US. This suggests that increased inventiveness can drive 'cultural drift' where small differences (introduced through local inventions) get amplified through people copying each other locally. This accelerated innovation, the researchers suggest, leads to a more heterogeneous cultural landscape, even in the midst of growing globalization.

Another factor at play is the recent decline of monolithic mass media to a multiplicity of media sources, including the online social media in which many people now participate.

Professor Bentley said: “As individuals copy each other through social media, rather than responding to centralized media, there can be stronger consensus in each local social group but more diversification between those groups globally. Names are only one example, of course, but this phenomenon suggests a way in which the interconnectedness of ‘globalization’ – a word that tends to connote homogeneity – may instead promote cultural diversity by allowing random drift to occur more pervasively.

“So, does globalization bring people together or drive them apart? Our study suggests it does both. Globalization makes it even easier for us to copy each other, but also increases our motivation to be original. The combination results in local social groups that grow apart through the inventiveness that occurs within them.”

**More information:** Paper: ‘[Accelerated innovation and increased spatial diversity of US popular culture](#)’ by R. Alexander Bentley and Paul Ormerod in *Advances in Complex Systems* (ACS)

## **Baby names in 1960 and 2009**

In 1960, the most popular name given to baby girls was Mary in almost every US state except for those in the Northwest and Northeast where Susan predominated. There was also some variety (Lori, Julie, Donna, Karen, Lisa) in some of the Western states. This homogeneity was also reflected in boys’ names, where the five that were locally most popular (David, James, Michael, John, Robert) comprised the top five for most states, and none was lower than 8th place in any state. There was also a clear geography to the boys’ names in 1960: David was most popular in

almost all states west of the Mississippi, James was most popular in the South, and John and Michael dominated the Northeast.

By 2009, the popularity of Mary had given way to multiple competing girls' names (Isabella, Emma, Olivia, Addison, Ava, Madison), and the geography of boys' names had become even more diverse (Aiden, Ethan, Jacob, Alexander, Anthony, Daniel, Jayden, William, Michael, Logan, Noah, Jose and Wyatt). Among boys' names, some continuity remained in the South (where William replaced James) and Northeast (where Michael gained), but west of the Mississippi the geographic pattern had dissolved into a mosaic.

Provided by University of Bristol

Citation: The decline of David and Mary: New inventiveness driving the diversification of popular culture (2012, February 20) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-02-decline-david-mary-diversification-popular.html>

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