


[SUBSCRIBE NOW >>](#)

TOP STORIES IN LIFE & CULTURE 1 of 12

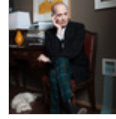


Eyeglasses: Which Frames Suit Your Styl...



The Best Emoji Apps for Total Beginners

2 of 12



John Waters Looks for Trouble

3 of 12

'Boyhood' Wins Best Dram: Film at Golde...

MIND AND MATTER

Humans Naturally Follow Crowd Behavior

Our sensitivity to crowds operates in a remarkably swift and automatic way

By ALISON GOPNIK



Email

Print

26 Comments



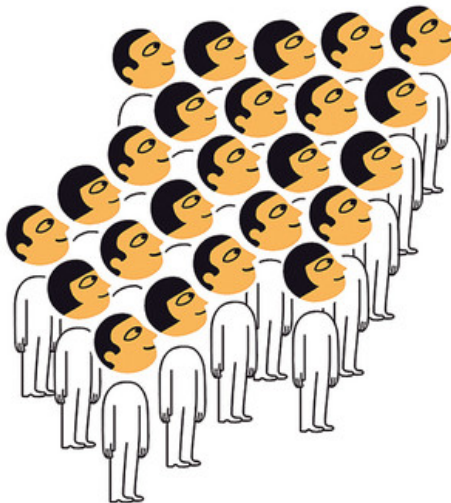
ARTICLE FREE PASS

Enjoy your free sample of exclusive subscriber content.

\$12 FOR 12 WEEKS

SUBSCRIBE NOW

Sept. 12, 2014 1:45 p.m. ET



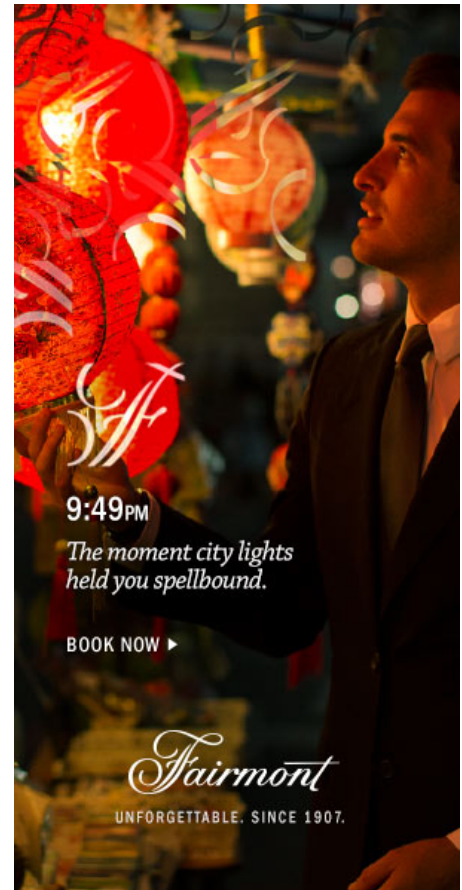
Luci Gutiérrez

It happened last Sunday at football stadiums around the country. Suddenly, 50,000 individuals became a single unit, almost a single mind, focused intently on what was happening on the field—that particular touchdown grab or dive into the end zone. Somehow, virtually simultaneously, each of those 50,000 people tuned into what the other 49,999 were looking at.

Becoming part of a crowd can be exhilarating or terrifying: The same mechanisms that make people fans can just as easily make them fanatics. And throughout human history we have constructed institutions that provide that dangerous, enthralling thrill. The Coliseum that hosts my local Oakland Raiders is, after all, just a modern knockoff of the massive theater that housed Roman crowds cheering their favorite gladiators 2,000 years ago.

(For Oakland fans, like my family, it's particularly clear that participating in the Raider Nation is responsible for much of the games' appeal—it certainly isn't the generally pathetic football.)

In fact, recent studies suggest that our sensitivity to crowds is built into our perceptual system and operates in a remarkably swift and automatic way. In a 2012 paper in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, A.C. Gallup, then at Princeton University, and colleagues looked at the crowds that gather in shopping centers and train stations.



Popular Now

[What's This?](#)

ARTICLES

1

Obama, Biden Absent From Paris Solidarity March



2

Opinion: The Obama College Plan



3

Professional Cuddlers Embrace More Clients

In one study, a few ringers simply joined the crowd and stared up at a spot in the sky for 60 seconds. Then the researchers recorded and analyzed the movements of the people around them. The scientists found that within seconds hundreds of people coordinated their attention in a highly systematic way. People consistently stopped to look toward exactly the same spot as the ringers.

The number of ringers ranged from one to 15. People turn out to be very sensitive to how many other people are looking at something, as well as to where they look. Individuals were much more likely to follow the gaze of several people than just a few, so there was a cascade of looking as more people joined in.

In a new study in *Psychological Science*, Timothy Sweeny at the University of Denver and David Whitney at the University of California, Berkeley, looked at the mechanisms that let us follow a crowd in this way. They showed people a set of four faces, each looking in a slightly different direction. Then the researchers asked people to indicate where the whole group was looking (the observers had to swivel the eyes on a face on a computer screen to match the direction of the group).



We follow a crowd via perceptual mechanisms that are quick almost beyond belief. *Getty Images*

Because we combine head and eye direction in calculating a gaze, the participants couldn't tell where each face was looking by tracking either the eyes or the head alone; they had to combine the two. The subjects saw the faces for less than a quarter of a second. That's much too short a time to look at each face individually, one by one.

It sounds impossibly hard. If you try the experiment, you can barely be sure of what you saw at all. But in fact, people were amazingly accurate. Somehow, in that split-second, they put all the faces together and worked out the average direction where the whole group was looking.

In other studies, Dr. Whitney has shown that people can swiftly calculate how happy or sad a crowd is in much the same way.

Other social animals have dedicated brain mechanisms for coordinating their action—that's what's behind the graceful rhythms of a flock of birds or a school of fish. It may be hard to think of the eccentric, gothic pirates of Oakland's Raider Nation in the same way. A fan I know says that going to a game is like being plunged into an unusually friendly and cooperative postapocalyptic dystopia—a marijuana-mellowed *Mad Max*.

But our brains seem built to forge a flock out of even such unlikely materials.

[Email](#) [Print](#) [26 Comments](#) [Order Reprints](#)



4 **Electric-Car Pioneer Elon Musk Charges Head-On at Detroit**



5 **Opinion: Defending Satire to the Death**



VIDEO

1 **Golden Globes 2015: Best and Worst Fashion**



2 **Germany Assesses Islam's Place in Its Society**



3 **Red-Carpet Arrivals at the Golden Globe**



4 **Need a Cuddle? Hire a Pro**



5 **Meet Mandrake, the Oregon Ducks' Mascot That Didn't Fly**



MONEYBEAT
THE PULSE OF THE MARKETS.
Your indispensable guide to the hot topics shaping today's global markets.
READ NOW ►
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL. *Read ambitiously* | **MONEYBEAT**

SPONSORED RESULTS

- [High Yield Bond Funds](#)
- [2014 Luxury Cars](#)
- [High Yield Savings Account](#)
- [2014 Luxury Sedans](#)
- [Best Stocks To Buy Now](#)
- [High-Yield CD Rates](#)
- [Top 5 Stocks To Buy](#)
- [Top Dividend Income Funds](#)
- [10 Stocks To Buy Now](#)
- [Fixed Income Investments](#)

[Join the Discussion](#)

[LOG IN TO COMMENT](#)

There are 26 comments.

1 person watching.

Newest



Richard Homa

From the science-fiction novel "Wasp", by Eric Frank Russell (1957). The protagonist is reading a series of newspaper articles

"The first told of a prankster in Roumania. This fellow had done nothing more than stand in the road and gaze fascinatedly at the sky, occasionally crying, 'Blue flames!' Curious people had joined him and gaped likewise. The group became a crowd; the crowd became a mob.

"Soon the audience blocked the street and overflowed into the side streets. Police tried to break it up, making matters worse. Some fool summoned the fire squads. Hysterics on the fringes swore they could see, or had seen, something weird above the clouds. Reporters and cameramen rushed to scene; rumours raced around. The government sent up the air force for a closer look and panic spread over an area of two hundred square, from which the original cause had judiciously disappeared."

Sep 24, 2014



zeev kirsh

the tyranny of 'expertise' is apparent when money is wasted to inject it into areas of common sense where it attempts to justify its own existence.

the same pattern defines economics to a tee. economics as a subject is mostly a scam as the experts attempt to convince others that common sense does not apply. the failure of the 'crowd' of economists to predict the 2008 collapse is a testament to how experts themselves sheepishly mimic one another in a crowd.

not only is the fallacy of expertise a danger to the common sense of thinking people, but the 'crowd' of experts are a useful tool deployed by those with control over 'funding' to manipulate perceived truth. how is it that so many of these same experts who are paid to write for the wall street journal so wrong in 2009 and yet they still have jobs and the wall street journal still makes money?

whenever common sense is contradicted by crowds of experts, there is a fraudulent agenda to dissuade the masses from listening to common sense

Sep 15, 2014

This account is under review.

SHOW MORE COMMENTS

\$12

for

12 Weeks

SUBSCRIBE NOW

DIGITAL + PRINT



Subscribe / Login

Back to Top

Customer Service Customer Center New! Live Help Contact Us WSJ Weekend Contact Directory Corrections	Policy Privacy Policy Cookie Policy Data Policy Copyright Policy Subscriber Agreement & Terms of Use Your Ad Choices	Ads Advertise Place a Classified Ad Sell Your Home Sell Your Business Commercial Real Estate Ads Recruitment & Career Ads Franchising Advertise Locally	Tools & Features Apps Emails & Alerts Graphics & Photos Columns Topics Guides Portfolio Old Portfolio	More Register for Free Reprints Content Partnerships Conferences SafeHouse Mobile Site News Archive
---	---	--	--	---