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IdeaLog No. 2 | The Galapagos Effect | Incredible Popular Delusions and the Madness of the Web

We're rugged individualists here in the United States. We're not about to drink the Kool-Aid. We stand by our guns (literally and figuratively). We're self-reliant. We think for ourselves. Right?

Not according to a long tradition of psychological research. Consider the classic experiment on conformity designed by Solomon Asch. Asch showed people lines of different lengths and asked them to tell which was longest or shortest. When operating on their own, only one person in 35 chose the incorrect answer. But when Asch enlisted confederates who posed as experimental subjects and asked these confederates to choose, unanimously, the wrong answer, almost 40 percent of the real experimental subjects conformed to the others' judgment and gave the wrong answer as well. Worse yet, a quarter of the time 75 percent of the people went along with the obviously incorrect answer.

Asch's experiment has been performed again and again, around the world, with similar results, and it suggests that the desire to conform runs deep in us, which isn't surprising in a species that grew up in small bands on African savannahs.

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One of the glories of the Web is that it creates communities. Whatever your interests or concerns, for good or ill, you can find others who share them. If you are diagnosed with breast cancer, you can readily go to the Web to find survivors who will share stories, advice, and encouragement. Interested in dirigible driving? Ugandan drumming? Macrophotography of insects? There's an Internet community for you. Chat rooms, instant messaging, blogs, RSS and Atom feeds, email distribution lists, Web rings, search engines, community portals, sharepoint servers, virtual worlds, Internet whiteboards, and most other technologies that run on the information superhighway exist for this purpose: facilitating community. That word, *community*, has a nice feel to it, doesn't it? Who doesn't like community?

But wed the ability of the Web to create community with our tendency toward conformity to the group, and you get something not quite so warm and fuzzy. Liberals go to liberal blogs, where they read the comments of other liberals. Conservatives go to conservative blogs, where they read the comments of other conservatives. So, liberals will learn that the top 10 percent of earners in the United States gets 48 percent of the income, and conservatives will learn that the top 10 percent of earners in the United States pays 70 percent of the taxes, and each will receive confirmation and no disconfirmation of his or her leaning. We know that people are terribly prone to a number of cognitive biases—to confirmation bias (the tendency to notice and remember information or ideas that confirm our beliefs), to anchoring bias (the tendency to place too much weight on something recently encountered), to the clustering effect (the

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tendency to see patterns where none exist), to the availability cascade (the tendency to ascribe plausibility to an idea that one hears repeated), to overgeneralization (the tendency to take particular confirming instances as general confirmation), to outgroup homogeneity bias (the tendency to think that people outside one's group are more similar than they are). These biases, and many more, are accentuated within isolated groups (those "communities" that sounded so nice a bit ago).

On the Web it's easy enough to find these sheltered in-groups. There's a large community on the Web of people convinced that the Federal Reserve is a private corporation owned by foreign bankers with a master plan for enslaving Americans by creating debt. There are thriving communities of Holocaust deniers, white supremacists, jihadists, people who think that vaccinating children causes autism, and folks convinced that the ruling families and financiers of the world are actually aliens from the Pleiades with a spaceport under the Vatican. Each group has its blogs, its websites, its reports and white papers detailing the "facts THEY don't want you to know," and continual exposure to these and only these sources of information creates an exponential increase in the group members' certainty. So extensive are the resources the Net has made available to such groups, and so sheltered are such groups on their virtual islands, that it's increasingly easy for those who have drunk some group's Kool Aid to point potential converts to "confirmation." "Don't believe me. Look for yourself. Do some research. Check out these sites."

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Darwin's finches showed such dramatic differences because they were isolated on separate islands where they were exposed to different selection pressures and evolved unique characteristics in response to those pressures. It isn't difficult to figure out why American politics has become so polarized in recent years. It's because of people's increasing isolation within their own electronic worlds, something I call the Galapagos Effect.

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