

How Social Proof affects our behaviour

 By [Sid Peimer](#)

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Mrs Keech (a pseudonym) was gifted with automatic writing. Basically she got messages from The Guardians of outer space, and would share the information with a small group who also believed the messages to be real. It became a serious matter when one day The Guardians advised Mrs Keech that the world would end, and only she and her group of believers would be saved. The group, firm in their conviction, needed no social proof, and sold all their belongings in anticipation of the fateful night.

Social Proof existed before social media

Social Proof is a concept that existed before social media became so pervasive. Basically it says that the more people who find an idea correct, the more the idea is correct for everyone else. So we often look for cues on how to behave ourselves when we see the actions of others. A sort of herd behaviour.

The Mrs Keech phenomenon is well documented, because three unbiased researchers joined the group and could relate in detail to what actually happened. The first phenomenon they noted was that pre-doomsday the group kept very much to themselves. In fact, they avoided publicity completely. The group was so sure of their beliefs and made no effort to try and convince the rest of us of the impending apocalypse.

The world does not end here

Anyhow, the moment arrived, and as you've probably guessed, the world did not come to an end. Some people started leaving the group. Mrs Keech then received the following message from the Guardians: because the group had believed them, they had saved the world from destruction. She then 'received' another message telling her to publicise the explanation.

So her behaviour altered completely - the policy of avoiding publicity changed - whereas previously the group kept to themselves, Mrs Keech now became zealous in trying to convince others to join the group. Once doubt crept in, more people needed to believe them, because the more people who find an idea correct, the more the idea is correct for everyone else. Social proof in action.

The Seattle pitted windshield epidemic

In the suburb of Bellingham, Seattle people began noticing small pits in their windscreens. It wasn't long before people thought they had discovered the cause - vandals using BB guns. However, the pitting started spreading to other suburbs with close on 3,000 complaints being received by the police. Additional theories began emerging: the new transmitter installed by the navy, cosmic rays from outer space, sand fleas, the earth's magnetic field and believe it or not - gremlins.

The real reason was that people were, for the first time, looking at their windscreen and not just through them. The phenomenon took hold initially, because more and more people found the idea correct that other forces were at play, as opposed to the fact that having a pitted windscreen is the result of driving your car. Take a look at your windshield and you'll probably see a small pit somewhere (sorry). The phenomenon of collective delusion took hold because of social proof - the more people who found the idea correct, the more the idea was correct for everyone else.

Donor fatigue

We all have a psychological accounting system in our brain. For example, if we were to lose a ticket on the way to an

event, we are less likely to buy another one than if we lost the same amount in cash. There is an item 'events' in our brain, and having to buy another ticket meant that this account was substantially overdrawn. The loss in cash came from a different perceptual account so it makes it somewhat less painful to buy the ticket even though the net effect is the same.

We have an accounting system for all expenses, and especially one that relates to charitable donations. I believe that most of us have an item in our heads labelled 'charity' and once that reaches a certain number we stop giving. A point in case was the New Year's Day tsunami where for the first time my non-profit clients were experiencing something called donor fatigue.

Everyone was giving to the tsunami victims, probably because it affected all nationalities, but particularly the fact that it was so graphic and easy to 'see'. Social proof swung into action when even the banks decided to advertise their charity accounts for the victims of the tragedy.

The end result was, I'm glad to say, substantial support for victims of this tragedy, but unfortunately created secondary victims: those charities that required the funds from your perceptual charity account which had now been spent. It was *de rigueur* to donate - the social proof was all around us: the more people who found the idea correct, the more the idea was correct for everyone else.

Social proof finds application wherever there are people. Whether following an ideology or wanting the latest cool device - what everyone else is saying and doing affects us more than we think.

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