

Failures of crowd intelligence

Source: Wikipedia

Surowiecki studies situations (such as [rational bubbles](#)) in which the crowd produces very bad judgment, and argues that in these types of situations their cognition or cooperation failed because (in one way or another) the members of the crowd were too conscious of the opinions of others and began to emulate each other and conform rather than think differently. Although he gives experimental details of crowds collectively swayed by a persuasive speaker, he says that the main reason that groups of people intellectually conform is that the system for making decisions has a systematic flaw.

Surowiecki asserts that what happens when the decision-making environment is not set up to accept the crowd, is that the benefits of individual judgments and private [information](#) are lost and that the crowd can only do as well as its smartest member, rather than perform better (as he shows is otherwise possible). Detailed case histories of such failures include:

Too homogeneous

Surowiecki stresses the need for diversity within a crowd to ensure enough variance in approach, thought process, and private information.

Too centralized

The [Columbia shuttle disaster](#), which he blames on a hierarchical [NASA](#) management bureaucracy that was totally closed to the wisdom of low-level engineers.

Too divided

The [US](#) Intelligence community failed to prevent the [11 September 2001 attacks](#) partly because information held by one subdivision was not accessible by another. Surowiecki's argument is that crowds (of [intelligence analysts](#) in this case) work best when they choose for themselves what to work on and what information they need. (He cites the [SARS](#)-virus isolation as an example in which the free flow of data enabled laboratories around the world to coordinate research without a central point of control.)

The [Office of the Director of National Intelligence](#) and the [CIA](#) have created a [Wikipedia](#) style information sharing network called [Intellipedia](#) that will help the free flow of information to prevent such failures again.

Too imitative

Where choices are visible and made in sequence, an "[information cascade](#)"^[2] can form in which only the first few decision makers gain anything by contemplating the choices available: once past decisions have become sufficiently informative, it pays for later decision makers to simply copy those around them. This can lead to fragile social outcomes.

Too emotional

Emotional factors, such as a feeling of belonging, can lead to [peer pressure](#), [herd instinct](#), and in extreme cases [collective hysteria](#).