



How The Weaponization of Loneliness Feeds On Humans' Conformity Impulse

Stella Morabito

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Wherever there is a monopoly on media, propaganda can control the narrative and thereby cultivate mass social conformity and compliance. Mass conformity then creates the illusion that a majority of society agrees with the propaganda, especially when any competing narrative is censored. This illusion has the snowball effect of drawing more people into accepting it.

But the fuel for acceptance comes from within each individual's psyche: our need to belong and our terror of social rejection. Through various methods that play on those needs and fears, people suddenly will clam up about their opinions and attitudes if they perceive that expressing such opinions will get them ostracized. They will lie about what they believe and even about what they see before them.

Denying the Evidence of Our Own Eyes

In 1951, Solomon Asch, professor of psychology at Swarthmore College, began his experiments with this key question: "How, and to what extent, do social forces constrain people's opinions and attitudes?" Much had already been written in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries about hypnosis and the effects of suggestibility on human behavior.

In each session of Asch's experiments, a group of seven to nine young men participated in what was described to them as a psychological experiment in visual judgment. Their task was simple: match up the length of a line on one card with the corresponding length from a choice of three very different lengths of lines on another card. The answer was obvious at least 99 percent of the time.

But in that group setting, only one was the subject. He was seated last or second to last. At a certain point, the collaborators started giving the same incorrect answer, one after the other. The subject suddenly felt "unexpectedly in a minority of one, opposed by a unanimous and arbitrary majority with respect to a clear and simple fact." He then had to decide which way to go: state the evidence of his own eyes or join the unanimous opinion of his peers. Furthermore, he had to answer publicly.

After over eighteen trials, subjects presented the wrong answer 36.8 percent of the time. Asch's experiment has been replicated widely since the 1950s, with greater diversity among participants, including in age and sex. Yet, the findings remain the same: one-third to half of the time, the subject conforms to the incorrect majority on an obvious and non-controversial fact. In the critical trials, only 25 percent of the participants held steadfast without giving in to pressure at all. The other 75 percent gave a wrong answer at least once.

On the bright side, Asch also showed us how easily you can challenge the illusion of unanimity if just one person openly agrees with you. In a variation on the experiment, when a collaborator gave a correct answer while the rest of the group was giving a false answer, the subject only gave in to group pressure 5 percent of the time, rather than 37 percent without a partner.

So, most of the power of group pressure—and our susceptibility to the conformity impulse—comes from the illusion of unanimity. *But whenever that unanimity is punctured—even by just one voice—the power of the group starts to collapse.* This is a critical point. It reveals why propagandists always insist on shutting down every single voice that challenges their narrative. Partnering busts up the manufactured illusion of unanimity, making it easier for others to create a cascade effect by chiming in with an opposing view.

Another variation on Asch's experiment tells us why authoritarians hate elections by secret ballot. When the subject was allowed to write down his answer confidentially, while the others were publicly giving an incorrect answer, conformity dropped like a rock.

Asch fully understood that all complex societies need some sort of consensus in order to function. But he emphasized that agreement is not productive unless every individual can contribute insights independently. If consensus comes only out of conformity, then “the social process is polluted.”

One of the most important aspects of the conformity impulse is the effect the behavior of others has on us as bystanders. Again, if you have a partner in alliance, it's much easier to resist social pressure. People far more often lack the courage to speak up when everyone around them is complicit in silence.

Hence, our conformity impulse is rooted in our urge to feel safe as part of the herd rather than cast out as a scapegoat. It's mostly as bystanders—as witnesses to the suffering of the afflicted, the ostracized, the canceled—that we react to our terror of social rejection and thereby let evil triumph.

Ninety percent of the population of Nazi Germany were not officially Nazis, and yet their fear-induced silence enabled the Holocaust. This bystander effect both reflects and reinforces our impulse to conform. If we don't keep this impulse in check by speaking up, the group in which we seek solace can easily become a mob.

Propaganda and popular culture play key roles in manipulating both the conformity impulse and bystander effect. When ordinary people watch the effects of cancel culture—the firings, the suspensions from social media, the ridicule, the smears, the scapegoating, destruction of livelihoods—they take note. Too often, this means they silently cooperate with these oppressive

measures in hopes of not being canceled themselves. They don't seem to understand that those shows of punishment were primarily meant to manipulate them, as bystanders, to behave exactly so.

This manipulation depends greatly on how both victims and bystanders respond to perceived threats of ostracism. In daily life, we are more apt to shut up about what we believe or even lie about what we believe in order to fit in.

Shutting Up and the Spiral of Silence

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, a professor at the Public Opinion Research Center in Allensbach, Germany, and the University of Chicago, studied the phenomenon of self-censorship due to social pressure. In her 1980 book *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion, Our Social Skin*, she delved deeply into the “bandwagon effect,” the tendency of people to follow where the majority seems to lead on an opinion.

Noelle-Neumann's central point in her spiral-of-silence model is that our deep fear of loneliness often dictates whether or not we express our beliefs to others. The stronger the fear, the more likely we will go along with the majority view, or, rather, the perceived majority view, or perhaps the view deemed acceptable by the authorities.

In the context of political correctness, this means that people tend to keep quiet when they think their opinion is considered unacceptable or held only by a ridiculed minority. Conversely, when people believe their view is held by the majority in a society, they're far more likely to express it. Those social forces then take on a life of their own, creating a spiral of silence for the perceived minority viewpoint even if it is, in reality, the majority viewpoint. The term “silent majority” grew in part out of this.

The aforementioned [2020 poll by the Cato Institute](#) validated the phenomenon. It found that 62 percent of Americans have political views they're fearful of expressing. It also concluded that “staunch liberals stand out as the only group who feels they can share their political opinions.” Having such opinions has, in fact, been richly rewarded by a monopolistic media, academia, and popular culture.

The Dangers of Lying about What We Believe

People also lie about what they believe, pretending to agree with others in the hopes of being socially accepted as well as out of fear of rejection. In *Private Truths, Public Lies* (1996), economist Timur Kuran explored the tendency toward “preference falsification” when faced with social pressure. Public opinion, he noted, was only as reliable as people's willingness to reveal their innermost selves. So, if we falsify our beliefs in our daily lives, “we distort, corrupt, and impoverish the knowledge in the public domain” and thus end up regulating the perceptions of others.

Pretending to go along with a belief you don't actually hold creates a ripple effect. Silence on your own views erodes public support for those views and encourages others who share them to remain silent themselves, even if it's, in fact, the majority opinion. This can create major

distortions in public opinion polling, which has huge implications for public policy because elected officials pay close attention to polling. It also causes ruptures in civil society by disrupting the flow of public discourse.

This ripple effect works in another way as well. Kuran coauthored a paper in 1999 with law professor Cass Sunstein that discussed the concept of “availability cascades.” They defined an availability cascade as “a self-reinforcing process of collective belief formation by which an expressed perception triggers a chain reaction that gives the perception of increasing plausibility through its rising availability in public discourse.”

In short, this means that public opinion (“collective belief formation”) is easily manipulated simply by injecting a new idea into the media and constantly repeating it. It’s an especially potent process if there is a media monopoly that can suppress any alternative views, which helps reinforce the injected “belief” until it becomes an “opinion cascade.”

Even if the opinion is fringy, as it gains more visibility through propaganda and popular culture, people begin to perceive a shift. And even if it’s an illusionary shift manufactured by unchallenged propaganda alone, people tend to go along with it. According to Kuran and Sunstein, most are motivated by reputational motives like maintaining their social status and not wanting to appear as a social misfit.

The authors also noted that this works even for ideas that seem completely implausible. I’d add that it can happen fast, even for opinions that were very recently accepted as delusional. Perhaps the most startling example of an implausible idea gaining quick acceptance occurred in Hitler’s Germany when an erstwhile civilized population accepted the Nazis’ theory of racial hygiene.

The Third Reich’s propaganda machine constantly injected the idea into the media, education, and culture, and at the same time, it harshly suppressed any competing views. So, a Holocaust ordinarily would have been a farfetched idea if robust debate was allowed. But it became tragic reality with free speech suppressed and the propaganda machine running rampant with demonization campaigns against dissenters.

Likewise, a monopoly on media control in which free speech is punished can lead us down other implausible paths. For example, around 2015, there seemed to be very abrupt public acceptance of transgenderism and all that it implied for laws that would end women’s sports, require the de-sexing of public facilities, and enforce gender ideology on children as young as pre-school. If you had mentioned that such things were imminent prior to Big Media and Big Tech’s monopoly on the conversation, you likely would have been ridiculed as a conspiracy theorist, even by advocates of the agenda itself.

But it wasn’t a sudden development. Public acceptance of gender ideology was a highly organized campaign decades in the making. It depended upon an availability cascade in which the illusion was repeatedly injected into public discourse, though we barely noticed. It reached critical mass during 2014–2015 when it exploded on the scene with a *Time Magazine* cover story “The Transgender Tipping Point,” and *Vanity Fair*’s cover story on Olympian Bruce Jenner’s

new identity as female, titled “Call Me Caitlyn.” Popular culture was soon saturated with transmania.

Many in the general public quickly got on board as the transgender lobby rallied all the forces it had been cultivating for decades: the courts, Hollywood, the medical establishment, the media, state legislatures, academia, large corporations, and their “allies” in the military and religious institutions. Very quickly, any dissent or questions about the agenda would get you socially destroyed. More people started falsifying what they believed and went along with the propaganda, adding to the spiral of silence and promoting the illusion of consent.

Pollution of Public Opinion Polling

Differences in public opinion polling and election results also tend to bear this out. Noelle-Neumann studied the shy voter phenomenon in various elections in the Federal Republic of Germany during the 1960s and 1970s, where polling indicated a certain party was ahead, but a last-minute swing ushered the opposing party into power.

In each of those cases, voting intentions did not change. Rather, Noelle-Neumann noted that the willingness to express one’s opinion— either outright or with a bumper sticker or campaign button—changed drastically depending on the political climate. “The climate of opinion depends on who talks and who keeps quiet,” she maintained. And of course, this divergence is also dependent on the integrity of a voting system that guarantees privacy in a secure voting booth so that one’s conscience can be freely expressed without any social pressures.

But what about the possibility of shunning or lying to pollsters in a free society where people feel the political climate is hostile to them? The results of two major 2016 elections seemed to be at odds with polling predictions for exactly that reason. Pollsters widely expected voters in the United Kingdom to vote to remain in the European Union in the June referendum on the matter. Instead, they voted to leave by a margin of 52 to 48 percent. There was similar shock at the results of the 2016 U.S. presidential election when Donald Trump pulled a major upset victory against Hillary Clinton, who was widely presumed to win.

All the above suggests that the free exchange of ideas in the private sphere of life is critical to the health of a society, and to have some grounding in what the public really believes. When people stop expressing what they believe, they are in effect regulating the perceptions of others and distorting public opinion.

This should also clarify why those with totalitarian impulses are intent on destroying the entire private sphere of life. The private sphere—where billions of conversations take place daily—has always been a thorn in the side of utopian dreams. Any outside influence is a potential threat to a totalitarian grasp on power.

Clearly, the path to destroying the private sphere is through cultivating the conformity impulse and bystander effect. But those elements must be fueled through very active social pressures. Propaganda plays a critical role in generating these pressures and, thus, in shaping mass psychology in ways that undermine and eventually destroy the private sphere of life.

Cyber-technologies magnify those social pressures, especially when “opinions” are expressed through millions of bots on social media, not by real people. This method of media control, dictated by algorithms, can tease out a contagious conformity impulse if people assume the bot-promoted agendas represent majority public opinion.