

# How to Stand out from the Crowd on the Internet

Marcin Napiórkowski, PhD

**When thinking about online fake news and conspiracy theories, we tend to focus on the content. However, the social relationships we make through information sharing are equally important. We repeat and share certain content in order to feel part of a community or, on the contrary, to assert our uniqueness. The creators of fake news know this all too well and masterfully exploit our desire to belong and to be unique.**

## Watch and repeat

Recently, different versions of this experiment have been going viral on the internet. On YouTube, videos are available of unsuspecting people being tricked into changing seats in a tram, performing bizarre acrobatics in a lift and even backing a hopeless candidate during a job interview. Each time, the mechanism is the same. An unaware participant enters a room filled with acting pranksters. On a prearranged cue, they start jumping up or changing places. After a moment's hesitation, most victims begin to follow the crowd. In a more advanced version, the victim of the prank sits on a committee to select the best candidate for a certain position. The first interlocutor is almost perfect, the second one is deeply flawed. And yet, when the deliberation begins, all the fake committee members unanimously praise the inferior one. How do the victims of the conspiracy behave in this situation? Usually, after briefly hesitating, they also vote for number two, although it is clear from their reactions captured on film that they were convinced of number one's superiority. This is how we are. We all have a strong need to conform: to follow the group, to adjust to its norms, to be recognized as a competent member.

Ms.Papper, Funny Lift Prank 2021 | Tiktok Lift Prank | Try Not To Laugh Lift Prank | Prank Videos, 08.12.2020 [accessed 14-April 2021]. Available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CbWVANWVms>



One of many short films showing pranks. The victim succumbs to peer pressure and starts to behave like the other people in the lift.

All the situations described here are basically variations of one of the most famous psychological experiments of all time. In 1955 a Polish-born American social psychologist Solomon Asch proved that when confronted with a trivial task of indicating the shortest of three lines, the subjects surprisingly often answered incorrectly only if they were surrounded by acting pretenders who unanimously gave such an answer. Of course, many factors come into play here (for example, the situation of the experiment itself, the authority of science, the suspicion of optical illusion), but to Asch's surprise it seemed that the subjects trusted the group's position more than their own eyes.

Asch's discovery gave rise to research into the phenomenon of conformity, that is, following others and adapting one's behaviour to group norms. Today, psychologists and cultural researchers know a lot about the mechanisms that govern conformity and strengthen it. We also have a good understanding of the dangers and traps associated with blindly following the crowd.

It probably will not surprise anyone to learn that the spread of content on the internet is to a large extent subject to the mechanisms of conformity.

**If everyone around us suddenly starts talking about a TV series, a game or a disturbing new discovery about the Second World War, we too are eager to find out what it is all about.**

Asch's experiment is well known to the staff of advertising agencies, and also to the creators of shady websites and, as you might guess, to the strategists who manage bot and troll farms. Fake news is often specifically constructed and distributed to launch a massive attack on specific user groups and influence the norms they share.

However, this is not the end of the story. On the contrary, it is only the beginning. It turns out that really sneaky information viruses are able to trap us even more cleverly and exploit not only our instinct for conformity but also the opposite impulse: the desire to stand out from the group, to be special, not to follow the crowd.

HeroicImaginationTV, Asch Conformity Experiment, 20.02.2012  
 [accessed 14 April 2021]. Available on YouTube:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NyDDyTlIDhA&t=139s>



↑ Solomon Asch's 1955 experiment re-enacted in 1971 for a TV programme. The participants (some of them dummies) were asked to choose the line closest in length to the reference one.

## Social currency

If everyone knows the same thing, there is no particularly attractive interlocutor. It is great to have access to information that is not widely known: to know something that others do not. Jonah Berger, a specialist in viral marketing and the author of such books as *Contagious. Why Things Catch On* and *Invisible Influence: The Hidden Forces that Shape Behavior* calls this phenomenon 'social currency'. Certain types of knowledge work in the same way as money, enabling us to 'buy' a higher position in the group.

**If the information we have access to is surprising, highly emotional and functional, its disclosure puts us in the position of experts or insiders.**

According to Berger, this is the most important ingredient for viral content, one that will conquer the internet and make for the perfect rumour.

As research into the spread of rumours shows, surprising information that does not conform to our view of the world often 'sticks to us' and bothers us. This is also known to the creators of internet adverts and disinformation specialists, who eagerly use the mechanism of 'social currency' to encourage us to click, comment and – above all – pass on the content, thanks to which we become a source of viral information for subsequent recipients.

On the one hand, there is the trap of conformity and, on the other hand, the desire for uniqueness and the dream of being perceived as a person who is in the know. Is it possible to fall into both traps at the same time? Can one fall prey to both excessive rebellion and excessive conformity?

## A rebel empire

The surprisingly popular pseudo-scientific story about the Kingdom of Lechia is a perfect example of such a double trap. It belongs to popular phenomena that can be described as 'fantasy archaeology'. As with stories about aliens building pyramids in Egypt and a 'great landing pad' in the Nazca Desert in Peru, stories about the Kingdom of Lechia present an attractive vision of the past reminiscent of Indiana Jones adventure films. At the same time – just like stories about 'secret Nazi weapons'

and 'the hidden truth about Roswell UFO incident' – the Kingdom of Lechia narrative introduces the theme of a contemporary conspiracy in which unspecified dark forces have access to secret knowledge, which becomes synonymous with power.

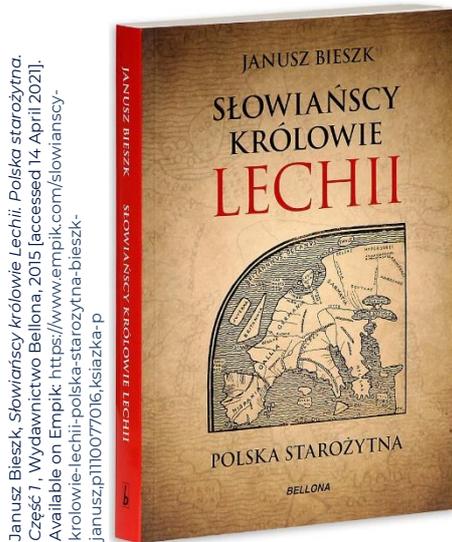
Miron, Lechici – Lachy – Polachy – Polacy, 14.08.2015 [accessed 14. April 2021]. Available on Słowianie – Wiara Przyrodzona. Mitologia Słowian – Boginie i Bogowie Słowiańscy – Cywilizacja Słowiańska: <https://wiaraprzyrodzona.wordpress.com/2015/08/14/lechici-lachy-polachy-polacy/>



↑ A map showing the alleged territories of Great Lechia in the sixth century.

Lechia is, in a nutshell, an ancient Slavic empire thousands of years old. The Lechites were supposedly the direct ancestors of the Poles. Before the Egyptians had built the pyramids, the Lechites had already enjoyed an extensive infrastructure and magnificent buildings. They beat Caesar and Alexander the Great on the battlefield and ruled over most of Europe. In the 10th century, they lost all that through a Catholic-Jewish-German conspiracy, which robbed them not only of their power but also – and above all – of the memory of their former greatness. According to authors such as Janusz Bieszk (*Słowiańscy królowie Lechii* [Slavic kings of Lechia]) and numerous online history specialists, there are plenty of sources to support this premise, from ancient chronicles to DNA research. And this is where the key question,

from our point of view, arises: if there is so much evidence, why have we never heard about it? Normally, this question might push us towards the mechanisms of conformity. If textbooks, television or anyone I know has never mentioned the Kingdom of Lechia, then there is probably something wrong with the whole story.



According to such authors as Janusz Bieszk, there exist many sources proving the existence of a powerful ancient Slavic empire.

But the promoters of the Lechitic theory deliberately use this lack of information as a starting point. ('They don't tell us about it, because it is a conspiracy after all.') In this way, knowledge of an ancient empire turns out to be a currency that distinguishes only the initiated. By selling this information to your friends, you can feel like someone who is in the know. And the information is attractive and emotionally charged, because which one of us would not like to feel like an heir to an ancient power?

And this is where the next step goes unnoticed. **An attractive identity based on rebellion and the rejection of conformity quickly allows us to forge new bonds and build new group solidarity.** 'We, the insiders, stick together.' 'Among us Lechites.'

The mechanisms of conformity begin to work again, but this time they cut us off from scientists, school, politicians and 'mainstream' media, binding us ever more tightly to the group that believes in a conspiracy theory. We feel like rebels fighting against a powerful empire of lies. And imperceptibly, we suddenly start to behave again like the subjects in Asch's experiment. We ignore our own fears, as well as the obvious errors and absurdities in the stories about the triumphs of the Lechites, and it does not even

occur to us that in our thinking we are again following a group (only this is a different one), because after all we are 'going against the flow' and 'starting to think for ourselves'.

This is why understanding the various mechanisms of social influence is so important for combatting disinformation effectively. The extent to which information spreads is affected not only by its content but also by the possibility of using knowledge to build social relationships. What is particularly important to recognize is that the initiative can also come from us. We are not just passive victims of manipulation. Sometimes, we ourselves search for particular information, pass it on and infect other users with it in order to feel important and appreciated.

Translation: Mikołaj Sekrecki

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