

Cognitive Bias #2 — Bandwagon Effect

Nobody asked but ...

Just this past Friday, we went to war with heavy reliance on the fact that we are susceptible to the bandwagon effect. We might also refer to this as “monkey see, monkey do” (while adding the cautionary “monkey get in trouble, too.”) We humans can’t seem to resist the spin and flash of a circus bandwagon. It comes as no surprise that lower forms of life, such as fish, love structure. Here in Kentucky, where we have lots of big, man-made lakes, the fish are said to gather in underwater structures, stumps, fallen trees, and human building ruins. Surely, we must be a step or two up the evolutionary ladder from fish. Ya think?

Last Friday night, POTUS gave the order to launch 59 missiles against a Syrian government air base. It looks as though this is suspiciously timed because the mainstream media have often left for the weekend by Friday night. This is referred to as the news cycle but it has nothing to do with the rhythms of news, it concerns the biorhythms of news folk who have not broken themselves of the 40-hour work week. The Friday night flight from the city is one of the largest bandwagon effects of modern life.

So we, like fish, huddle along structural icons of formalism. The next huddle will be seen by the jingoistic huzzahs emanating from bars and sports stadia between Friday and Monday. The spin machine, speaking of structure, roared into life Saturday morning, cranking out endorsements from right wing celebs, the Speaker of the House, and the Majority Leader of the Senate. By the time the workaday media got back to their desks on Monday, the bandwagon has almost reached the fairgrounds.

A Google News search, as of Tuesday afternoon, shows that the only mention, in the first six stories, of the act of war concerns a squabble between the US and Russia about how to spin the story, “Trump administration says new evidence discredits Russia’s claims on chemical attack.” The next 5 stories are about the passenger who was dragged off of a United Airlines flight, a political race in Kansas, a school murder/suicide, alleged illegal immigration, and European soccer-related violence. No mention of what could be the start of WW3 is seen. Not only did we have a bandwagon, but several which served to obliterate the trail of the first one.

— Kilgore Forelle