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"Mobs" vs "Crowds"

7-9 minutes

"*If everyone is thinking alike, then no one is thinking.*" –Benjamin Franklin

What's the difference between a "mob" and a "crowd"?

It's a subtle but important distinction — because each is known for almost completely antithetical outcomes. One is known for wisdom, in the sense of "the wisdom of crowds," and the other is known for short-sighted, misguided behavior (usually aggression), in the sense of "mob mentality."

So what are the nuanced, but key differences, of each?

What are the motivations behind joining something as notorious as a mob? And what is the backdrop and context in which you would join something that may feel righteous in the short-run, but inevitably lacks any virtue at all in the end?

Additionally, do you "join" a crowd? Or are you just a part of one without knowing it? And is there a point in which a crowd becomes a mob? If so, what are the characteristics of that point — and is it a point from which there is no return? It's been interesting to think about this in a world where you can see the benefits of a crowd working together (for the benefit of all) in something like Wikipedia one minute, then see the "culture of outrage" on Twitter the next.

Let's start with some basic observations of a mob. No one takes pride in having been a part of a mob. Most people, from folks looting a department store during a riot, or being on the side of the classmates cheering and jeering on the school blacktop when a hapless peer got the stuffing beat out of them, regret their participation. In fact, most of us would look back at mob involvement and feel ashamed. It served our primal need for connection and unity, but it was the wrong kind of unity. How can we avoid having our higher judgment hijacked by the moment and recognize when a mob wave is trying to pull us into its current?

It's a tough question, but I'll try to answer it.

Zooming out, in the day and age we live in, technology connects us with others across the globe more seamlessly than at any point in human history.

If you see a "crowd" forming, get ready for a mob to take over. In the "wisdom of the crowds" sense, those in a crowd are disconnected from each other. This is a very key aspect of us bringing our best

thinking forward. You want one hundred disconnected opinions so that you can find the 10-15 that bunch up together.

The social utility of banding together enters the minds of the group, community, or "crowd" — and like a boulder down a hill, it devolves from the power of numbers in a crowd to a consensus driven desire to fit in and be a part of something.

How do you keep this devolution from happening, since wisdom from crowds also needs the power of numbers? Disconnect the nodes. If you're running a meeting, solicit input individually and not all together. If you're running a protest, make it very clear and very definitive what the group will and won't tolerate in person (because once the 'nodes' are connected, thinking will be outsourced to the least common denominator, and the group will trade truth for belonging).

A good litmus test is that if you can see it happening (from a trend on Twitter to outside your window in a neighbor's front-yard), you're not looking at a crowd forming. You're looking at a mob forming. You generally can't see crowds (meaning the kind that creates and signals wisdom).

So what to do with this information in an age of ever-increasing connectedness? One thing you can do to avoid getting swept into poor judgment is to disconnect. Disconnect from things we call "news". Disconnect in things we call "discourse". Distance yourself from labels that people use as shorthand to package up viewpoints (and the people that have them). One day it's shorthand. The next day, it's an identity.

If you must connect on a daily basis, don't outsource your thinking to the opinions of others. You don't need to be a contrarian to everything, because researching everything independently is tiring and not very practical. But you can use this adage to your advantage to spot an opportunity when independent thinking may be a good use of time: "If everybody is thinking alike, then no one is thinking."

Additionally, another way to spot mob mentality (and avoid the potential of a growing wave hijacking your better judgment) is to avoid these two scenarios:

(1) Unity formed out of division (ie unity *against* something rather than unity *for* something) or unity out of fear (similar to unity out of division, but like an animal that feels cornered, this kind of "unity" is likely prone to even more drastic / lower quality collective decision making). Unity for something is like a funnel pointing at a particular outcome, a point of arrival. Unity against something is the opposite. It's open ended, and leaves many outcomes (often conflicting with one another) up for grabs, and the unity will become either ineffective or divisive and moot when this type of "unity" has no common end-goal in mind.

(2) Another sign of mob-mentality is the collective commitment to community over truth. This is perhaps the most subtle and natural tendency we're pre-wired for, because community has often translated directly to survival throughout the last 10,000 years, so the pull here is strong. It's rarely violent and aggressive like the mob-mentality above, but it's just as prone to hijack your better judgment and stifle wisdom. Communal beliefs that are untrue are bad enough, but it is our commitment to them, and our commitment to each other, that subdues the truth and slows progress both in the macro sense or micro sense[1].

The poet Henrik Ibsen said that "the majority is always wrong; the minority is rarely right." And in an era of unprecedented connectedness, where every minority can find a community online in which they form the "majority", perhaps the wisest thing you can do is to disconnect and do it often. And the second-wisest thing may be to remind yourself (and others) that you're in fertile ground for mob-recruitment, where power is given to volume, and wisdom gets run over.

— End —

*Note: Connection and union with others around us is intrinsically wired into our DNA — It's one of our most basic pursuits (because it historically directly led to survival). But a characteristic to look for between a healthy community, and a mob is where the connection comes from. In my view, common unity, or comm-unity, is a collective entity that stands "for something" and mob-unity is a collective entity that stands "against something". It's the difference between the civil rights movement here in the United States in the 60's and the Occupy Wall Street movement earlier this decade.

[1] In general, a community's strength is also its weakness: its commitment is to each other — not to truth. So when you see a community, like a suburb, a company, your friend group on facebook, or an academic department, be wary of their very strength turning into a weakness over time — and the strengths of their connection creating the conditions for communal poor judgment that stifles truth and wisdom over time.