

## PERSPECTIVE

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Lemmings are small rodents. They weigh around 115 grams, measure up to 15cm, and live in the Arctic. If you've never seen a lemming (most people haven't), they look somewhat like a cross between a gerbil and a chubby mouse. Suffice it to say that they're furry, cute and cuddly, so long as they're out on the tundra and not in your kitchen.

This otherwise nondescript and unassuming critter took on a significance far beyond its little station in life thanks to a 1958 Disney documentary called *White Wilderness*, which received universal acclaim, garnering an Academy Award for best documentary that year. This, of course, brought instant fame to one of the stars of the film — lemmings.

Through captivating footage, melodramatic background music and riveting monotone narration characteristic of the day, the film relates the tale of mass suicide by lemmings. According to the filmmakers, lemmings periodically embark on group migrations when their populations increase.

On and on they march, compelled by some irresistible "one track thought"... climbing hills and crossing ice, until finally, they reach a cliff.

Queue ominous drum roll: "Ahead lies the Arctic shore, and beyond, the sea... This is the last chance to turn back. Yet over they go, casting themselves bodily out into space."

This narration accompanies footage of little rodents hurling themselves headlong over a high cliff into the frigid waters below, most surviving the fall, only to die shortly thereafter while swimming aimlessly out to sea.

Compelling cinematography. Heart-wrenching tale.

So overwhelming was the story that the hitherto obscure lemmings became — in an instant — embedded in both popular culture and the common lexicon.

The saying "like lemmings to water" derives from this film, referencing the rodents' enigmatic impulse to follow one another into oblivion. Today, the phrase describes the tendency for people to go-with-the-flow and do/ believe what everyone else does and believes, without exercising due consideration — the implication being that bad things can happen if you just follow the crowd.

I bring this up because the power of the media has increased exponentially since the time of *White Wilderness*. In the 1950s, it took days, weeks or longer for news and stories to permeate the global consciousness. Yet even then, as is clear from this example, media wielded great power to influence and mould our thoughts and perceptions.

Today, a proliferation of media forms — TV, radio, print, websites, blogs, podcasts, social networking sites, cell phones... you get the idea — means that we're bombarded by exponentially more information at a much more rapid pace than people have ever been.

Much of this is good, as learning and sharing of information has become more efficient, but there's also a less savoury side.

Most of us believe what we see on TV, read in the paper, or hear from friends, family and colleagues. But as the saying goes, "A lie told often enough becomes truth."

Soundbites are repeated verbatim from news outlet to news outlet, usually

without sufficient background checks. Headlines like "Shark attacks man!" or "1998 is the hottest year on record!" are repeated ad infinitum, until they become truth, irrespective of the facts.

*White Wilderness* is a case in point. The lemming story was a lie.

Yes, that's right. The entire saga was manufactured and pawned on the adoring public by Disney. Other than the fact that lemmings exist and live in the Arctic, the tale is a complete sham.

In reality, lemmings aren't stupid enough to commit mass suicide for no reason. The filmmakers paid children to catch lemmings, then staged the migration scenes (at times using a lazy-Susan-style revolving table like the ones in Chinese restaurants), and threw the lemmings into the water (actually a river, not the sea) to create the suicide scenes. They even filmed the episode in Alberta, Canada, where there are no lemmings.

So here's a thought — if *White Wilderness*, in a time when media penetration was much less pervasive than today, was able to win an Academy Award and change the English language based on a lie, what does that suggest about the potential to be misinformed or misled by media today?

Ironically, though the saying "like lemmings to water" comes from a lie, the phrase accurately describes precisely what *White Wilderness* did — lead the public over a figurative cliff, "like lemmings to water".

If there's a lesson to be gleaned from this, perhaps it's that lemmings aren't the ones who need to be wary of blindly following one another off cliffs. We are.

Until next time, happy diving! ☺

See film clip.



<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-4192932441686635859>