

Apollo - Success Bias

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In Event of Moon Disaster:

Fate has ordained that the men who went to the moon to explore in peace will stay on the moon to rest in peace. These brave men, Neil Armstrong and Edwin Aldrin, know that there is no hope for their recovery. But they also know that there is hope for mankind in their sacrifice.

These two men are laying down their lives in mankind's most noble goal: the search for truth and understanding. They will be mourned by their families and friends; they will be mourned by the nation; they will be mourned by the people of the world; they will be mourned by a Mother Earth that dared send two of her sons into the unknown.

In their exploration, they stirred the people of the world to feel as one; in their sacrifice, they bind more tightly the brotherhood of man.

In ancient days, men looked at the stars and saw their heroes in the constellations. In modern times, we do much the same, but our heroes are epic men of flesh and blood.

Others will follow, and surely find their way home. Man's search will not be denied. But these men were the first, and they will remain the foremost in our hearts.

For every human being who looks up at the moon in the nights to come will know that there is some corner of another world that is forever mankind.”

- Richard Nixon if something had gone wrong with Apollo 11



On the 49th anniversary of the Apollo landings (actually that's in two days - July 20 but I ship this blog every Wednesday), I think it is important to reflect on how different and daring what Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin did when they separated the lander from the command module and descended to the surface of the moon (indeed they **almost ran out of fuel and aborted the landing** ^[a]). This is a well told (and televised) story, but this speech, written in anticipation of disaster helps frame the risks that these men took. We always remember the first successful attempt at something because of the publicity it attracts and its later memorialization across our collective memory. This seems unfortunate as it might have the propensity to dull our appreciation of the risk and expectation of difficulty for tasks that we will attempt (at least after some passage of time - major disasters have the tendency to linger). Progress is hard. For every **Hillary and Norgay on Everest** ^[b], there's a **Mallory and Irvine** ^[c], and for every **"one small step for man"** ^[d], there's a **fire on Apollo I** ^[e].

It's probably more appropriate to classify this as a bias towards extremes moreso than a bias towards success. Evolution has ingrained in us a strong appreciation of danger, and we long remember and change our behavior in response to events like terrorist attacks and crime (**perhaps a bit too much** ^[f]). For things like summiting large mountains and putting man on the moon, everyday people are sufficiently divorced from the struggle and personal sacrifice required to succeed and failings if not large in scope will probably not be covered as extensively as their complimentary successes (perhaps

because covering the status quo is boring). I wonder if the democratization of media through sites like YouTube and the increase in proximity they bring with it will begin to change this [2]. My intuition is that this would lessen but not eliminate the effects as far more people would presumably be exposed to headlines celebrating success than would watch daily or weekly videos.

Related reading:

I'm a pretty big data nerd and bayesian at heart so I'm always on the lookout for types of bias that lead our mental models of the world astray. [Survivorship bias](#) [9] is one of the most interesting — famously used by statistician [Abraham Wald during the Second World War](#) [h] to more accurately determine where armor should be placed on planes bombing Germany (spoiler — don't fortify the areas of the planes that have bullet holes in them, fortify the areas that are free of them). There are [a lot more](#) [i] types of statistical bias that are quite interesting. I like to double check my certainty of understanding events by trying to estimate my exposure to biases like these.

When I cross posted this on [my Medium](#) [j] on 07/01/19 I added some reflection:

[1] People don't like Nixon for reasonable reasons but have you heard about his Vice President before Gerald Ford-Spiro Agnew? Agnew was a straight up take money in the Oval Office type of crook. MSNBC did a podcast called [Bag Man](#) [k] on him.

[2] In the startup world there's been a big development of a "[hustle porn](#)" [l] culture which fetishizes failure and looking really busy. This feels less like the failures I'm writing about and more like reality TV.

Links

- a. space.com/26593-apollo-11-moon-landing-scariest-moments.html
- b. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1953_British_Mount_Everest_expedition
- c. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1924_British_Mount_Everest_expedition
- d. youtube.com/watch?v=Z9WDsgClroE
- e. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apollo_1
- f. bloomberg.com/view/articles/2018-02-12/pssst-crime-may-be-near-an-all-time-low
- g. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Survivorship_bias
- h. medium.com/@penguinpress/an-excerpt-from-how-not-to-be-wrong-by-jordan-ellenberg-664e708cfc3d
- i. data36.com/statistical-bias-types-explained
- j. medium.com/@spencerburleigh
- k. msnbc.com/bagman
- l. qz.com/work/1458073/reddit-co-founder-alexis-ohanian-is-taking-a-stand-against-hustle-porn

