

America's Cult of Ignorance—And the Death of Expertise

More people are better educated than ever before, and knowledge is easier to come by. So why do we so often scorn those who plainly know more than we do?



“There is a cult of ignorance in the United States, and there always has been. The strain of anti-intellectualism has been a constant thread winding its way through our political and cultural life, nurtured by the false notion that democracy means that ‘my ignorance is just as good as your knowledge.’”

—Isaac Asimov

In the early '90s, a small group of “AIDS denialists,” including a University of California professor named Peter Duesberg, argued against virtually the entire medical establishment’s consensus that the human immunodeficiency virus (*HIV*) was the cause of *Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome*. Science thrives on such counterintuitive challenges, but there was no evidence for Duesberg’s beliefs, which turned out to be baseless. Once researchers found *HIV*, doctors and public health officials were able to save countless lives through measures aimed at preventing its transmission.

The Duesberg business might have ended as just another quirky theory defeated by research. The history of science is littered with such dead ends. In this case, however, a discredited idea nonetheless managed to capture the attention of a national leader, with deadly results. Thabo Mbeki, then the president of South Africa, seized on the idea that *AIDS* was caused not by a virus but by other factors, such as malnourishment and poor health, and so he rejected offers of drugs and other forms of assistance to combat *HIV* infection in South Africa. By the mid-2000s, his government relented, but not before Mbeki’s fixation on *AIDS* denialism ended up costing, by the estimates of doctors at the *Harvard School of Public Health*, well over three hundred thousand lives and the births of some thirty-five thousand *HIV*-positive children whose infections could have been avoided. Mbeki, to this day, thinks he was on to something.

Many Americans might scoff at this kind of ignorance, but they shouldn’t be too confident in their own abilities. In 2014, the *Washington Post* polled Americans about whether the United States should engage in military intervention in the wake of the 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine. The United States and Russia are former *Cold War* adversaries, each armed with hundreds of long-range nuclear

weapons. A military conflict in the center of Europe, right on the Russian border, carries a risk of igniting World War III, with potentially catastrophic consequences. And yet only one in six Americans—and fewer than one in four college graduates—could identify Ukraine on a map. Ukraine is the largest country entirely in Europe, but the median respondent was still off by about 1,800 miles.

Map tests are easy to fail. Far more unsettling is that this lack of knowledge did not stop respondents from expressing fairly pointed views about the matter. Actually, this is an understatement: the public not only expressed strong views, but respondents actually showed enthusiasm for military intervention in Ukraine *in direct proportion to their lack of knowledge about Ukraine*. Put another way, people who thought Ukraine was located in Latin America or Australia were the most enthusiastic about the use of U.S. military force.

These are dangerous times. Never have so many people had so much access to so much knowledge and yet have been so resistant to learning anything.

In the United States and other developed nations, otherwise intelligent people denigrate intellectual achievement and reject the advice of experts. Not only do increasing numbers of lay people lack basic knowledge, they reject fundamental rules of evidence and refuse to learn how to make a logical argument. In doing so, they risk throwing away centuries of accumulated knowledge and undermining the practices and habits that allow us to develop new knowledge.

This is more than a natural skepticism toward experts. I fear we are witnessing the *death of the ideal of expertise* itself, a Google-fueled, Wikipedia-based, blog-sodden collapse of any division between professionals and laypeople, students and teachers, knowers and wonderers—in other words, between those of any achievement in an area and those with none at all.

Attacks on established knowledge and the subsequent rash of poor information in the general public are sometimes amusing. Sometimes they're even hilarious. Late-night comedians have made a cottage industry of asking people questions that reveal their ignorance about their own strongly held ideas, their attachment to fads, and their unwillingness to admit their own cluelessness about current events. It's mostly harmless when people emphatically say, for example, that they're avoiding gluten and then have to admit that they have no idea what gluten is. And let's face it: watching people confidently improvise opinions about ludicrous scenarios like whether "Margaret Thatcher's absence at Coachella is beneficial in terms of North Korea's decision to launch a nuclear weapon" never gets old.

When life and death are involved, however, it's a lot less funny. The antics of clownish anti-vaccine crusaders like actors Jim Carrey and Jenny McCarthy undeniably make for great television or for a fun afternoon of reading on Twitter. But when they and other uninformed celebrities and public figures seize on myths and misinformation about the dangers of vaccines, millions of people could once again be in serious danger from preventable afflictions like measles and whooping cough.

The growth of this kind of stubborn ignorance in the midst of the Information Age cannot be explained away as merely the result of rank ignorance. Many of the people who campaign against established knowledge are otherwise adept and successful in their daily lives. In some ways, it is all *worse* than ignorance: it is unfounded arrogance, the outrage of an increasingly narcissistic culture that cannot endure even the slightest hint of inequality of any kind.

By the "death of expertise," I do not mean the death of actual expert abilities, the knowledge of specific things that sets some people apart from others in various areas. There will always be doctors and diplomats, lawyers and engineers, and many other specialists in various fields. On a day-to-day basis, the world cannot function without them. If we break a bone or get arrested, we call a doctor or

a lawyer. When we travel, we take it for granted that the pilot knows how airplanes work. If we run into trouble overseas, we call a consular official who we assume will know what to do.

This, however, is a reliance on experts as technicians. It is not a *dialogue* between experts and the larger community, but the use of established knowledge as an off-the-shelf convenience as needed and only so far as desired. Stitch this cut in my leg, but don't lecture me about my diet. (More than two-thirds of Americans are overweight.) Help me beat this tax problem, but don't remind me that I should have a will. (Roughly half of Americans with children haven't bothered to write one.) Keep my country safe, but don't confuse me with the costs and calculations of national security. (Most U.S. citizens do not have even a remote idea of how much the United States spends on its armed forces).

All of these choices, from a nutritious diet to national defense, require a conversation between citizens and experts. Increasingly, it seems, citizens don't want to have that conversation. For their part, they'd rather believe they've gained enough information to make those decisions on their own, insofar as they care about making any of those decisions at all.

On the other hand, many experts, and particularly those in the academy, have abandoned their duty to engage with the public. They have retreated into jargon and irrelevance, preferring to interact with each other only. Meanwhile, the people holding the middle ground to whom we often refer as "*public intellectuals*"—I'd like to think I'm one of them—are becoming as frustrated and polarized as the rest of society.

The death of expertise is not just a rejection of existing knowledge. It is fundamentally a rejection of science and *dispassionate rationality*, which are the foundations of modern civilization. It is a sign, as the art critic Robert Hughes once described late 20th century America, of "*a polity obsessed with therapies and filled with distrust of formal politics,*" chronically "*skeptical of authority*" and "*prey to superstition.*" We have come full circle from a premodern age, in which folk wisdom filled unavoidable gaps in human knowledge, through a period of rapid development based heavily on specialization and expertise, and now to a postindustrial, information-oriented world where all citizens believe themselves to be experts on everything.

Any assertion of expertise from an actual expert, meanwhile, produces an explosion of anger from certain quarters of the American public, who immediately complain that such claims are nothing more than fallacious "*appeals to authority,*" sure signs of dreadful "*elitism,*" and an obvious effort to use credentials to stifle the dialogue required by a "*real*" democracy. Americans now believe that having equal rights in a political system also means that each person's opinion about anything must be accepted as equal to anyone else's. This is the credo of a fair number of people despite being obvious nonsense. It is a flat assertion of actual equality that is always illogical, sometimes funny, and often dangerous. This book, then, is about expertise.

The immediate response from most people when confronted with the death of expertise is to blame the Internet. Professionals, especially, tend to point to the Internet as the culprit when faced with clients and customers who think they know better. As we'll see, that's not entirely wrong, but it is also too simple an explanation. Attacks on established knowledge have a long pedigree, and the Internet is only the most recent tool in a recurring problem that in the past misused television, radio, the printing press, and other innovations the same way.

So why all the fuss? What exactly has changed so dramatically for me to have written this book and for you to be reading it? Is this really the "*death of expertise,*" or is this nothing more than the usual complaints from intellectuals that no one listens to them despite their self-anointed status as the smartest people in the room? Maybe it's nothing more than the anxiety about the masses that arises

among professionals after each cycle of social or technological change. Or maybe it's just a typical expression of the outraged vanity of overeducated, elitist professors like me.

Indeed, maybe the death of expertise is a sign of progress. Educated professionals, after all, no longer have a stranglehold on knowledge. The secrets of life are no longer hidden in giant marble mausoleums, the great libraries of the world whose halls are intimidating even to the relatively few people who can visit them. Under such conditions in the past, there was less stress between experts and lay people, but only because citizens were simply unable to challenge experts in any substantive way. Moreover, there were few public venues in which to mount such challenges in the era before mass communications.

Participation in political, intellectual, and scientific life until the early 20th century was far more circumscribed, with debates about science, philosophy, and public policy all conducted by a small circle of educated males with pen and ink. Those were not exactly *the Good Old Days*, and they weren't that long ago. The time when most people didn't finish high school, when very few went to college, and when only a tiny fraction of the population entered professions is still within living memory of many Americans.

Social changes only in the past half century finally broke down old barriers of race, class, and sex not only between Americans in general but also between uneducated citizens and elite experts in particular. A wider circle of debate meant more knowledge but more social friction. Universal education, the greater empowerment of women and minorities, the growth of a middle class, and increased social mobility all threw a minority of experts and the majority of citizens into direct contact, after nearly two centuries in which they rarely had to interact with each other.

And yet the result has not been a greater respect for knowledge, but the growth of an irrational conviction among Americans that everyone is as smart as everyone else.

This is the opposite of education, which should aim to make people, no matter how smart or accomplished they are, learners for the rest of their lives. Rather, we now live in a society where the acquisition of even a little learning is the endpoint, rather than the beginning, of education. And this is a dangerous thing.

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