

Introduction

The Death of Expertise

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 1990s, 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.¹ 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 US military force.²

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,

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otherwise intelligent people denigrate intellectual achievement and reject the advice of experts. Not only do increasing numbers of laypeople 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 antivaccine 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 US 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 twentieth-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. Or, more

accurately, it is about the relationship between experts and citizens in a democracy, why that relationship is collapsing, and what all of us, citizens and experts, might do about it.

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 laypeople, 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 twentieth century was far more circumscribed, with debates about science, philosophy, and public policy all conducted by a small

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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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In the chapters that follow, I'll suggest several sources of this problem, some of which are rooted in human nature, others that are unique to America, and some that are the unavoidable product of modernity and affluence.

In the next chapter, I'll discuss the notion of an "expert" and whether conflict between experts and laypeople is all that new. What

does it even mean to be an expert? When faced with a tough decision on a subject outside of your own background or experience, whom would you ask for advice? (If you don't think you need any advice but your own, you're likely one of the people who inspired me to write this book.)

In chapter 2, I'll explore why conversation in America has become so exhausting not just between experts and ordinary citizens, but among everyone. If we're honest, we all would admit that any of us can be annoying, even infuriating, when we talk about things that mean a great deal to us, especially regarding beliefs and ideas to which we're firmly attached. Many of the obstacles to the working relationship between experts and their clients in society rest in basic human weaknesses, and in this chapter we'll start by considering the natural barriers to better understanding before we look more closely at the particular problems of the early twenty-first century.

We all suffer from problems, for example, like "confirmation bias," the natural tendency only to accept evidence that confirms what we already believe. We all have personal experiences, prejudices, fears, and even phobias that prevent us from accepting expert advice. If we think a certain number is lucky, no mathematician can tell us otherwise; if we believe flying is dangerous, even reassurance from an astronaut or a fighter pilot will not allay our fears. And some of us, as indelicate as it might be to say it, are not intelligent enough to know when we're wrong, no matter how good our intentions. Just as we are not all equally able to carry a tune or draw a straight line, many people simply cannot recognize the gaps in their own knowledge or understand their own inability to construct a logical argument.

Education is supposed to help us to recognize problems like "confirmation bias" and to overcome the gaps in our knowledge so that we can be better citizens. Unfortunately, the modern American university, and the way students and their parents treat it as a generic

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commodity, is now part of the problem. In chapter 3 I'll discuss why the broad availability of a college education—paradoxically—is making many people think they've become smarter when in fact they've gained only an illusory intelligence bolstered by a degree of dubious worth. When students become valued clients instead of learners, they gain a great deal of self-esteem, but precious little knowledge; worse, they do not develop the habits of critical thinking that would allow them to continue to learn and to evaluate the kinds of complex issues on which they will have to deliberate and vote as citizens.

The modern era of technology and communications is empowering great leaps in knowledge, but it's also enabling and reinforcing our human failings. While the Internet doesn't explain all of the death of expertise, it explains quite a lot of it, at least in the twenty-first century. In chapter 4, I'll examine how the greatest source of knowledge in human history since Gutenberg stained his fingers has become as much a platform for attacks on established knowledge as a defense against them. The Internet is a magnificent repository of knowledge, and yet it's also the source and enabler of a spreading epidemic of misinformation. Not only is the Internet making many of us dumber, it's making us meaner: alone behind their keyboards, people argue rather than discuss, and insult rather than listen.

In a free society, journalists are, or should be, among the most important referees in the great scrum between ignorance and learning. And what happens when citizens demand to be entertained instead of informed? We'll look at these unsettling questions in chapter 5.

We count on the media to keep us informed, to separate fact from fiction, and to make complicated matters comprehensible to people who do not have endless amounts of time and energy to keep up with every development in a busy world. Professional journalists, however, face new challenges in the Information Age. Not only is there,

by comparison even to a half century ago, almost unlimited airtime and pages for news, but consumers expect all of that space to fill instantaneously and be updated continuously.

In this hypercompetitive media environment, editors and producers no longer have the patience—or the financial luxury—to allow journalists to develop their own expertise or deep knowledge of a subject. Nor is there any evidence that most news consumers want such detail. Experts are often reduced to sound bites or “pull quotes,” if they are consulted at all. And everyone involved in the news industry knows that if the reports aren’t pretty or glossy or entertaining enough, the fickle viewing public can find other, less taxing alternatives with the click of a mouse or the press of a button on a television remote.

Experts are not infallible. They have made terrible mistakes, with ghastly consequences. To defend the role of expertise in modern America is to invite a litany of these disasters and errors: thalidomide, Vietnam, the *Challenger*, the dire warnings about the dietary hazards of eggs. (Go ahead and enjoy them again. They’re off the list of things that are bad for you.) Experts, understandably, retort that this is the equivalent of remembering one plane crash and ignoring billions of safely traveled air miles. That may be true, but sometimes airplanes *do* crash, and sometimes they crash because an expert screwed up.

In chapter 6, I’ll consider what happens when experts are wrong. Experts can be wrong in many ways, from outright fraud to well-intentioned but arrogant overconfidence in their own abilities. And sometimes, like other human beings, they just make mistakes. It is important for laypeople to understand, however, how and why experts can err, not only to make citizens better consumers of expert advice but also to reassure the public about the ways in which experts try and police themselves and their work. Otherwise, expert errors become fodder for ill-informed arguments that leave specialists

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resentful of attacks on their profession and laypeople fearful that the experts have no idea what they're doing.

Finally, in the conclusion I'll raise the most dangerous aspect of the death of expertise: how it undermines American democracy. The United States is a republic, in which the people designate others to make decisions on their behalf. Those elected representatives cannot master every issue, and they rely on experts and professionals to help them. Despite what most people think, experts and policymakers are not the same people, and to confuse the two, as Americans often do, corrodes trust among experts, citizens, and political leaders.

Experts advise. Elected leaders decide. In order to judge the performance of the experts, and to judge the votes and decisions of their representatives, laypeople must familiarize themselves with the issues at hand. This does not mean that every American must engage in deep study of policy, but if citizens do not bother to gain basic literacy in the issues that affect their lives, they abdicate control over those issues whether they like it or not. And when voters lose control of these important decisions, they risk the hijacking of their democracy by ignorant demagogues, or the more quiet and gradual decay of their democratic institutions into authoritarian technocracy.

Experts, too, have an important responsibility in a democracy, and it is one they've shirked in recent decades. Where public intellectuals (often in tandem with journalists) once strove to make important issues understandable to laypeople, educated elites now increasingly speak only to each other. Citizens, to be sure, reinforce this reticence by *arguing* rather than *questioning*—an important difference—but that does not relieve experts of their duty to serve society and to think of their fellow citizens as their clients rather than as annoyances.

Experts have a responsibility to educate. Voters have a responsibility to learn. In the end, regardless of how much advice the

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professionals might provide, only the public can decide the direction of the important policy choices facing their nation. Only voters can resolve among the choices that affect their families and for their country, and only they bear the ultimate responsibility for those decisions.

But the experts have an obligation to help. That's why I wrote this book.

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