

# Anti-Intellectualism and the "Dumbing Down" of America

There is a growing anti-intellectual dumbing down of our culture

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There is a growing and disturbing trend of anti-intellectual elitism in American culture. It's the dismissal of science, the arts, and humanities and their replacement by entertainment, self-righteousness, ignorance, and deliberate gullibility.

Susan Jacoby, author of *The Age of American Unreason* ([link is external](#)), says in an article in the *Washington Post*, "Dumbness, to paraphrase the late senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, has been steadily defined downward for several decades, by a combination of heretofore irresistible forces. These include the triumph of video culture over print culture; a disjunction between Americans' rising level of formal education and their shaky grasp of basic geography, science and history; and the fusion of anti-rationalism with anti-intellectualism."

There has been a long tradition of anti-intellectualism in America, unlike most other Western countries. Richard Hofstadter, who won a Pulitzer Prize in 1964 for his book, *Anti-Intellectualism In American Life*, describes how the vast underlying foundations of anti-elite, anti-reason and anti-science has been infused into America's political and social fabric. Famous science fiction writer Isaac Asimov once said: "There is a cult of ignorance in the United States, and there has always 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."

Mark Bauerlein, in his book, *[The Dumbest Generation](#)*(*link is external*), reveals how a whole generation of youth are being dumbed down by their aversion to reading anything of substance and their addiction to digital "crap" via social media.

Journalist Charles Pierce, author of *[Idiot America](#)*(*link is external*), adds another perspective: "The rise of idiot America today represents--for profit mainly, but also and more cynically, for political advantage in the pursuit of power--the breakdown of a consensus that the pursuit of knowledge is a good. It also represents the ascendancy of the notion that the people whom we should trust the least are the people who best know what they are talking about. In the new media age, everybody is an expert."

"There's a pervasive suspicion of rights, privileges, knowledge and specialization," says Catherine Liu, the author of *[American Idyll: Academic Antielitism as Cultural Critique](#)* (*link is external*) and a film and media studies professor at University of California. The very mission of universities has changed, argues Liu. "We don't educate people anymore. We train them to get jobs."

Part of the reason for the rising anti-intellectualism can be found in the declining state of education in the U.S. compared to other advanced countries:

- After leading the world for decades in 25-34 year olds with university degrees, the U.S. is now in 12<sup>th</sup> place. The World Economic Forum ranked the U.S. at 52nd among 139 nations in the quality of its university math and science instruction in 2010. Nearly 50% of all graduate students in the sciences in the U.S. are foreigners, most of whom will be returning to their home countries;
- The Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs commissioned a civic education poll among public school students. A surprising 77% didn't know that George Washington was the first President; couldn't name Thomas Jefferson as the author of the Declaration of Independence; and only 2.8% of the students actually passed the citizenship test. Along similar lines, the Goldwater Institute of Phoenix did the same survey and only 3.5% of students passed the civics test;

- According to the National Research Council report, only 28% of high school science teachers consistently follow the National Research Council guidelines on teaching evolution, and 13% of those teachers explicitly advocate creationism or "intelligent design;"
- 18% of Americans still believe that the sun revolves around the earth, according to a Gallup poll;
- The American Association of State Colleges and Universities report on education shows that the U.S. ranks second among all nations in the proportion of the population aged 35-64 with a college degree, but 19<sup>th</sup> in the percentage of those aged 25-34 with an associate or high school diploma, which means that for the first time, the educational attainment of young people will be lower than their parents;
- 74% of Republicans in the U.S. Senate and 53% in the House of Representatives deny the validity of climate change despite the findings of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences and every other significant scientific organization in the world;
- According to the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress, 68% of public school children in the U.S. do not read proficiently by the time they finish third grade. And the U.S. News & World reported that barely 50% of students are ready for college level reading when they graduate;
- According to a 2006 survey by National Geographic-Roper, nearly half of Americans between ages 18 and 24 do not think it necessary to know the location of other countries in which important news is being made. More than a third consider it "not at all important" to know a foreign language, and only 14 percent consider it "very important;"
- According to the National Endowment for the Arts report in 1982, 82% of college graduates read novels or poems for pleasure; two decades later only 67% did. And more than 40% of Americans under 44 did not read a single book--fiction or nonfiction--over the course of a year. The proportion of 17 year olds who read nothing (unless required by school ) has doubled between 1984-2004;

- [Gallup released a poll](#)(link is external) showing 42 percent of Americans still believe God created human beings in their present form less than 10,000 years ago;
- A 2008 University of Texas study found that 25 percent of public school biology teachers believe that humans and dinosaurs inhabited the earth simultaneously.

In American schools, the culture exalts the athlete and good-looking cheerleader. Well-educated and intellectual students are commonly referred to in public schools and the media as "nerds," "dweebs," "dorks," and "geeks," and are relentlessly harassed and even assaulted by the more popular "jocks" for openly displaying any intellect. These anti-intellectual attitudes are not reflected in students in most European or Asian countries, whose educational levels have now equaled and will surpass that of the U.S. And most TV shows or movies such as The Big Bang Theory depict intellectuals as being geeks if not effeminate.

[John W. Traphagan](#)(link is external) ,Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Texas, argues the problem is that Asian countries have core cultural values that are more akin to a cult of intelligence and education than a cult of ignorance and anti-intellectualism. In Japan, for example, teachers are held in high esteem and normally viewed as among the most important members of a community. There is suspicion and even disdain for the work of teachers that occurs in the U.S. Teachers in Japan typically are paid significantly more than their peers in the U.S. The profession of teaching is one that is seen as being of central value in Japanese society and those who choose that profession are well compensated in terms of salary, pension, and respect for their knowledge and their efforts on behalf of children.

In addition, we do not see in Japan significant numbers of the types of religious schools that are designed to shield children from knowledge about basic tenets of science and accepted understandings of history--such as evolutionary theory or the religious views of the Founding Fathers, who were largely deists--which are essential to having a fundamental understanding of the world, Traphagan contends. The reason for this is because in general Japanese value education, value the work of intellectuals, and see a

well-educated public with a basic common knowledge in areas of scientific fact, math, history, literature, etc. as being an essential foundation to a successful democracy.

We're creating a world of dummies. Angry dummies who feel they have the right, the authority and the need not only to comment on everything, but to make sure their voice is heard above the rest, and to drag down any opposing views through personal attacks, loud repetition and confrontation.

Bill Keller, writing in the [New York Times](#) (link is external) argues that the anti-intellectual elitism is not an elitism of wisdom, education, experience or knowledge. The new elite are the angry social media posters, those who can shout loudest and more often, a clique of bullies and malcontents baying together like dogs cornering a fox. Too often it's a combined elite of the anti-intellectuals and the conspiracy followers – not those who can voice the most cogent, most coherent response. Together they ferment a rabid culture of anti-rationalism where every fact is suspect; every shadow holds a secret conspiracy. Rational thought is the enemy. Critical thinking is the devil's tool.

Keller also notes that the herd mentality takes over online; the anti-intellectuals become the metaphorical equivalent of an angry lynch mob when anyone either challenges one of the mob beliefs or posts anything outside the mob's self-limiting set of values.

Keller blames this in part to the online universe that “skews young, educated and attentive to fashions.” Fashion, entertainment, spectacle, voyeurism – we're directed towards trivia, towards the inconsequential, towards unquestioning and blatant consumerism. This results in intellectual complacency. People accept without questioning, believe without weighing the choices, join the pack because in a culture where convenience rules, real individualism is too hard work. Thinking takes too much time: it gets in the way of the immediacy of the online experience.

Reality TV and pop culture presented in magazines and online sites claim to provide important information about the importance of *The Housewives of [you name the city]* that can somehow enrich our lives. After all, how else can one explain the insipid and pointless stories that tout divorces, cheating and weight gain? How else can we explain

how the Kardashians, or Paris Hilton are known for being famous for being famous without actually contributing anything worth discussion. The artificial events of their lives become the mainstay of populist media to distract people from the real issues and concerns facing us.

The current trend of increasing anti-intellectualism now establishing itself in politics and business leadership, and supported by a declining education system should be a cause for concern for leaders and the general population, one that needs to be addressed now.