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*How America Lost Faith in Expertise,*



intellectual was gently ridiculed because he was not needed; now he is fiercely resented because he is needed too much.”

In 2015, the law professor Ilya Somin observed that the problem had persisted and even metastasized over time. The “size and complexity of government,” he wrote, have made it “more difficult for voters with limited knowledge to monitor and evaluate the government’s many activities. The result is a polity in which the people often cannot exercise their sovereignty responsibly and effectively.” Despite decades of advances in education, technology, and life opportunities, voters now are no better able to guide public policy than they were in Hofstadter’s day, and in many respects, they are even less capable of doing so.

The problem cannot be reduced to politics, class, or geography. Today, campaigns against

intellectual progress. Yet these days, members of the public search for expert errors and revel in finding them—not to improve understanding but rather to give themselves license to disregard all expert advice they don't like.

Part of the problem is that some people think they're experts when in fact they're not. We've all been trapped at a party where one of the least informed people in the room holds court, confidently lecturing the other guests with a cascade of banalities and misinformation. This sort of experience isn't just in your imagination. It's real, and it's called "the Dunning-Kruger effect," after the research psychologists David Dunning and Justin Kruger. The essence of the effect is

Conspiracy theories are attractive to people who have a hard time making sense of a complicated world and little patience for boring, detailed explanations. They are also a way for people to give context and meaning to events that frighten them. Without a coherent explanation for why terrible things happen to innocent people, they would have to accept such occurrences as nothing more than the random cruelty of either an uncaring universe or an incomprehensible deity.

And just as individuals facing grief and confusion look for meaning where none may exist, so, too, will entire societies gravitate toward outlandish theories when collectively subjected to a terrible national experience. Conspiracy theories and the awed reasoning behind them, as the Canadian writer Jonathan Kay has

But facts are not the same as knowledge or ability—and on the Internet, they're not even always facts. Of all the axiomatic "laws" that describe Internet usage, the most important may be the predigital insight of the science fiction writer Theodore Sturgeon, whose eponymous rule states that "90 percent of everything is crap." More than a billion websites now exist. The good news is that even if Sturgeon's cynicism holds, that yields 100 million pretty good sites—including those of all the reputable publications of the world; the homepages of universities, think tanks,

Moreover, the whole point of the wisdom of crowds is that the members of the crowd supposedly bring to bear various independent opinions on any given topic. In fact, however, the Internet tends to generate communities of the like-minded, groups dedicated to confirming their own preexisting beliefs rather than challenging them. And social media only amplifies this echo chamber, mi

than democracies (despite some popular stereotypes to the contrary). In a democracy, the expert's service to the public is part of the social contract. Citizens delegate the power of decision on myriad issues to elected representatives and their expert advisers, while experts, for their part, ask that their efforts be received in good faith by a public that has informed itself enough—a key requirement—to make reasoned judgments.

This relationship between experts and citizens rests on a foundation of mutual respect and trust. When that foundation erodes, experts and laypeople become warring factions and democracy itself can become a casualty, decaying into mob rule or elitist technocracy. Living in a world awash in gadgets and once unimaginable conveniences and entertainments, Americans (and many other Westerners) have become almost childlike in their refusal to learn enough to govern themselves or to guide the policies that affect their lives. This is a collapse of functional citizenship, and it enables a cascade of other baleful consequences.

In the absence of informed citizens, for example, more knowledgeable administrative and intellectual elites do in fact take over the daily direction of the state and society. The Austrian economist F. A. Hayek wrote in 1960, "The greatest danger to liberty today comes from the men who are most needed and most powerful in modern government, namely, the efficient expert



