

Anti-intellectual

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Pundit is a term from Hindi meaning “wise and learned man”, but it is usually used sarcastically in modern parlance. But, y’know, I don’t feel so sarcastic about it. You can decide the “wise” part for yourself, but having spent a couple of years studying the narrow topic of subject matter expansion in patent law, I am confident describing myself as an authority. It’s been months since I’ve heard a new argument on either side of the debate, and the new facts I’m learning are increasingly fine details. I don’t feel any hubris when I say that nobody is going to blindside me on the tiny, narrow bit of subject that I have chosen for myself.

And ya know, most of the arguments that I have presented in various media and to various bigwigs over the last few months are arguments that numerous non-experts have also made.

I often run into people who divide academic results into two categories: (1) things anybody could have come up with after a bit of thought, and (2) things that are too esoteric to be worth anything. Some exceptions are made for chemists and engineers, whose work the commonsense folk have some sense is esoteric but will somehow eventually lead to new toys or a cure for something, but everybody else—the mathematicians who study tensors in R^{14} , the biologists who study odd tropical flora, and most importantly, the anthropologists and sociologists and economists who study people, whom we all study every day—are wasting their time and our money.

Findings

Nor is the righteous ‘my common sense trumps their PhDs’ attitude restricted to the stereotypical hick. The back page of Harper’s magazine, the page most magazines reserve for the humorous finale, is the *Findings* section, that lists a series of out-of-context study results. From the March 2006 issue: “. . . It was discovered that guppies experience menopause and that toxic waste in the Arctic was turning polar bears into hermaphrodites. . . . A survey found that Americans are becoming less repulsed by the sight of obese people. Scientists launched a study to determine what sorts of clothing make a woman’s bottom look too big. A study found that Americans are more miserable today than they were in 1991, and British researchers discovered that many young girls enjoy mutilating their Barbie dolls.”

OK, what are we to make of this? What message is being sent? Mashing together the studies means that the findings do not add up to any real image of the world, even if the page does categorize the findings for some sense of flow. Readers can’t drop these

tidbits into cocktail party conversation, because they only have one piece of information and so aren't armed for even the simplest follow-up. Interested readers can't learn more, because there are no citations. More importantly, there is no context: we are not given the reason for studying guppy reproductive systems, so we don't know why a scientist would care to do such a thing.

Being the back page, we know that it's supposed to be humorous, and with everything taken out of context, it can be, the way that so many statements out of context or in a different context are funny. But there's also the sense of laughing at the scientists. The subject of every sentence (but the passive-voice ones) is a researcher or a study or a survey. If the editors just wanted to list facts, they'd say "Americans are becoming less repulsed..." but instead they waste ink pointing out that "A study found that Americans are becoming less repulsed..."

If there were an American Association Against Science, they would probably reprint the Findings page verbatim. The AAAS would ask, in big red letters, "Why are we spending money on this?" and the answer to *why* would not be anywhere to be found.

But you know that I spend all day studying obscure features of people's behavior and reading math books, so it's no surprise that I'm anti-anti-intellectual. It's no secret that if I had an anti-intellectual in the room here, I'd tell him or her (reading from Harper's again) "New data suggested that Uranus is more chaotic than was previously thought."

[[See, statements in a different context are downright hilarious!]]

But it goes further than my kind of academic. The anti-intellectual sentiment—the insistence that it's either common sense or it's not worth the trouble—is a belief that there is no such thing as an expert. It is the myopic belief that if I don't know it, then there's nothing to know. As such, the anti-intellectual sentiment is often aimed at targets well far afield from intellectuals.

At the Baltimore Museum of Art, the same establishment that houses Picasso's *Mother and Child*, are such aggressively simple works of art as two silkscreen reprints of the Last Supper, and a curtain of blue and silver beads. Some readers will recognize the first as a work by Andy Warhol, and thus know the context: Mr. Warhol felt that the repetition and mutation of familiar images created new perspectives. For the second, as for a great deal of art that was clearly easy to execute, we don't know the context at all.¹ But even though we don't know it, there is a context. The guy went to art school, has had a few focal ideas that drove all his work, and has done years of pieces that led to this simple bead curtain.

So what is an expert to do? One approach is to always stick to things that are obscure and look hard. Make sure that every study, every work of art, every essay says *fuc* you, I'm an expert and you can't do what I do*. But we value people who make it look effortless, whether they're figure skating, producing a painting, or running regressions. We always value simplicity, so if all it takes to get across the message is a curtain of beads, then why overcomplicate things to remind the viewer that it took years of work to get there? Some of the best guitarists out there never really ventured past four chords, while the guys who can play intricate solos are often dubbed *wankers*.

¹Sorry, I can't help the art snobs in the audience with the guy's name. Enjoy being in the dark with me here.

I'm glad I wrote my PhD thesis, and more generally love the idea of a thesis in general, including for high school seniors, BAs, or anywhere in between. A good thesis means that the author has become an expert in some tiny, irrelevant little corner of the world. Research ability by itself is valuable, and it's good practice for when the student needs to be an authority in something of more practical value, but it also gives the student an idea of what the other experts of the world have gone through to get to their simple ends. Remember that part in *Zoo Story* where the guy says that "sometimes it's necessary to go a long distance out of the way in order to come back a short distance correctly"? A student who has gone a long way in becoming an expert, and must then reduce that to the sort of ten second summaries that we all give to friends and family, will have a better understanding of the long distance that other experts have gone before they could string together simple words or beads or chords.