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“Thinking is Hard but Not Thinking is Dangerous”

What has led to widespread distrust in academic and clinical research that transparently presents numerical evidence for the effectiveness of COVID-19 restrictions? Is it isolated to people who identify with conservative right-winged ideologies? Is it a lack of formal education? Is the rejection of experts and their findings by the public a phenomenon exclusive to an individual political, religious, or social identity?

Or is the inherent mistrust of experts and academics a deep-rooted cultural phenomenon; blind to religious, political, or social identities; among the American populous, so subliminal that it has a chokehold on how Americans live their everyday lives?

“It is this feeling that there are a bunch of elites that don't really care about me, or that don't care about my well-being... Politicians don't care, they just want money,” Krissy Lunz Trujillo, a postdoctoral research associate with a joint appointment at Harvard University and Northeastern University, said. “[Scientists] are sort of corrupted by monetary gains.”

Not surprisingly, COVID-19 deniers, vaccine haters and Qanon shamans are part of the new manifestation of extreme skeptic who believe the “intellectual elites” are shelled up in their shiny East Coast institutions behind closed doors, contributing little to society, attempting to tell the conventional hard-working man what to do and how to deal with their lives.

There is this “perception that intellectuals and experts are from cities, and they... broadcast what they think is correct or what people should do,” Trujillo said. “Often that’s seen by some rural residents as getting talked down or told what to do by people they might not respect or have types of knowledge that [the rural residents] might not respect.”

This dismissive attitude Trujillo describes is known as anti-intellectualism, which is a perceived cultural bias observed in the American public, famously put as “a resentment and suspicion of the life, the mind and of those who are considered to represent it; and a disposition constantly to minimize the value of that life,” by Richard Hofstadter in his 1965 book, “Anti-Intellectualism in American Life.”

Put more simply by Trujillo; anti-intellectualism is “a distrust of experts, intellectuals, or people who society says, has expertise in something” by individuals who don’t take them seriously.

There are anti-intellectual individuals, groups, or societies. People can be overtly anti-intellectualist – a person who flat out says they do not trust experts – or covertly – a person distrustful about seeing a doctor but not being able to consciously understand where this feeling of distrust is coming from.

Contrary to superficial understanding, anti-intellectualism isn't suggesting a lack of formal education or hostility towards acquiring knowledge. Anti-intellectualism isn't a person who didn't finish grade school, consequently lacking academic knowledge beyond what they obtained in that domain nor is it people hating the idea of learning more things.

But where does this come from if not from lack of formal education or laziness? Why have we created and propagated a culture that fails to validate scientific research? When is this heightened level of skepticism warranted?

In America, the preference of populous ideals over academic study dates to the founding of the country. The Founding Fathers, like much of the puritan colonial population, upheld the image of the common laboring man who was interested in agriculture, craftsmanship and freedom from the state; reasonable values to have after living under repressive British aristocratic rule full of Anglican elites telling the pious puritans they can't be pious puritans.

Since the Founding Fathers' puritanical upheaval of the self-made man who could accumulate wealth via hard work and "The American Dream" plus the complementary distaste for intellectuals who did not work and, therefore, did not serve God, consequently lacking morals; there have been 244 years of intellectual disenfranchisement of academia in the American populous to preserve the idea of individual freedom and a sense of agency.

"So, there's a psychological benefit essentially, it's a way to sort of recoup feeling looked down on or left out, in that they can take agency into their own hands and take decision making into their own hands and feel like well, I have agency and I have authority," Trujillo said.

Anti-intellectualism and extreme skepticism can be a way to preserve the power of the people and prevent elites, academic or otherwise, from obtaining too much power over the average person.

As a means of preserving American democracy, anti-intellectualism is not such a sinister force. But, when invalidating information, such as scientific peer-reviewed data, that does not warrant such scrutiny, patriotism becomes simple ignorance and a petri-dish of impressionable people who struggle to critically think for themselves.

This ignorance and stubbornness can be harnessed by the likes of Tucker Carlson to push racist, anti-science, and anti-critical thought narratives for the benefit of people who capitalize on hate and ignorance.

Trujillo explains that since the population doesn't ask questions or think critically about what they see on TV, they become the population most easily manipulated into buying harmful products and support populous leaders that are often anti-democratic.

Another prominent example of anti-intellectualism is McCarthyism, which was a direct creation of anti-intellectualist sentiments, where intellectuals were accused of sharing communist and socialist ideals – really, they were just thinking and asking questions - something intolerable in America during the Red Scare.

While most science-denying noise and academic animus today tends to come from alt-right media and organizations, this phenomenon is not isolated to alt-right affiliates. This is a more general problem that transcends political identities.

“Ever since the development of social media, people have decided that hearing their beliefs reinforced by a small community and listening to the same close community is a better source of information than... listening to intellectuals or having to read anything” said Michael Adrian Peters, senior research fellow at Auckland University. Peters suggests the alt-rights harnessing of social media enabled the rise of modern conservative conspiracies and is only one modern example of anti-intellectualism in the world.

Social media creates an echo chamber where misinformation can be regurgitated among gullible groups of people. What anti-intellectualism does is encourage people to cling to their beliefs, share their beliefs regardless of truth or contradictory evidence, creating little room to question conventional beliefs.

When conventional beliefs cannot be questioned, it sets a precedent for conformity, thus eliminating the incentive for critical thinking. When the ability to criticize is diminished or disenfranchised, the possibility for societal action – or action at all – to change systems is minimal.

“It goes back to the claims about corruption of the youth [against] Socrates. He really had a method by which he asked critical questions about a whole range of issues,” Peters said. “Anti-intellectualism is very much part of intellectualism... [Intellectualism] is the courage to ask questions of very powerful people... there are very few people that could get away with asking those kinds of critical questions, because they would be put to death.”

Much like Socrates was forced to consume hemlock for asking too many questions and much like many Americans were blacklisted for allegations of being communist sympathizers and having red hair – the only thing red about Lucille Ball; scientists, doctors, and experts are being persecuted in the court of public opinion.

Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases since 1984, [has received death threats](#) for exercising procedural public health principles. He is not alone with several other doctors and health care providers receiving similar threats.

Anti-intellectualism puts feelings over facts, posing danger for many people both consciously and not.

“I also recognize that one should not always just blindly follow the expertise, or that experts and intellectuals are human and therefore fallible,” Trujillo said.

Trujillo’s warning is sound. Much like Aristotle, a philosophical genius who believed the Earth was the center of the universe was proven wrong by Galileo, experts can be wrong. But we don’t

discredit them until after rounds of peer-reviewed research or mathematically infallible arguments are presented.

“All you must do is believe it, right? You don’t have to test it, you don’t have to think about it, and you don’t have to ask awkward questions. Thinking is quite difficult. It takes you some time, and sometimes it gives you a headache,” Peters said. “Values or ideas have been commodified. And you like just buying them in the shop... let’s all stick together... [Its] part of the process of the commodification of ideas. You don’t even have to spend money to get them. All you have to do is join.”

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