



Feature
You can't tell me anything

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To judge by the gleefully bull-headed ignorance shown by politicians, bloggers and others, scientific evidence and scholarly analysis may soon count for nothing. Jon Marcus considers where this anti-intellectual climate leaves the academy.

"When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?" - John Maynard Keynes

The US comedian and social critic Bill Maher had an exchange this summer with a respected economist that was more sobering than funny.

Days after Republicans in the US Congress agreed to raise the nation's debt ceiling in exchange for huge cuts to the federal budget only hours before the moment when, economists had predicted, the world's superpower would go into default, Maher asked his guest why politicians and the public had been so quick to dismiss the warnings of such well-educated experts.

Like the scientists who have over decades built a huge body of evidence and a consensus about global warming but find their work still rejected as fiction, economists all along the political spectrum had warned in vain that failing to raise the debt ceiling would harm the nation's credit rating.

Nonsense, retorted several members of Congress during a pitched battle that was more redolent of Lord of the Flies than Robert's Rules of Order. Yet within days of the widely disparaged 11th-hour compromise, the credit rating agency Standard & Poor's downgraded the US bond rating.

"People just want to say the sky is green," lamented Maher's guest, Christina Romer, the former chair of the president's Council of Economic Advisers, who has left the government to return to her position on the faculty of the University of California, Berkeley.

Referring to economists and climate scientists, Maher said to Romer: "You're both people that knew real things that you study (at a university) ..."

"That's the nicest thing anybody's said about me," Romer interrupted.

"And then, how should I put it, the stupid people, who don't know things - who at least used to know they were stupid - have hijacked the deliberations."

"Isn't it frustrating", Maher continued, "when people who don't know anything about the subject you're so versed in get an equal vote in the debate?"

Romer responded: "It is frustrating. A lot of the times, policy would be better if we listened to the experts."

Yet the world seems to be ignoring the experts - even actively contesting them, having judged them to be among the people whose headlong mistakes caused the international economic downturn. The credibility of the intellectual classes, including academics, has come under attack in the US and elsewhere. And while scholars such as Romer may be exasperated by this new reality, some concede that they and their institutions bear a portion of the blame.

Quantitative Study of Society, says: "It's really a result of the loss of liberal arts education. There has been an explosion of what amount to trade schools and, even in (many) universities, a curriculum that is trade school-like. Social sciences and the humanities have melted away. Physicists don't read the great works of history. The biggest problem is the loss of the background that a liberal arts education gives you in terms of context."

Nie is also CEO of Revolution Analytics, a company founded in 2007 that produces sophisticated statistical-analysis software. He observes that hand in hand with huge leaps in data collection and availability have come increasingly frequent sloppy misinterpretations of the facts.

"I don't think the data themselves are corrosive, or the amount of data," he says. "It's who produces the data, for what purposes, and who's got the background to understand it. What societies have always relied on is a top 10 or 20 or 30 per cent who are opinion leaders and social interpreters. You would hear a speech and go and talk to a friend who was more knowledgeable about politics, and then you would form an opinion. I no longer think we have a core of people who have the material and contextual background to be those interpreters."

Instead, at a time when information is more abundant than ever, people seem less informed - or less willing to inform themselves. US newspapers, whose circulations have plummeted by 30 per cent since 1990, have recently felt compelled to launch an advertising campaign for themselves encouraging people to actually read the news. The hopeful slogan? "Smart is the New Sexy." An entire industry has sprouted up to correct the misstatements of politicians, corporations and the media. The most prominent, PolitiFact, even has a smartphone application it calls the Truth-O-Meter.

Yet when US presidential candidates make egregious errors of historical fact (in addition to guaranteeing that the debt-limit debate would not damage the nation's credit rating, Republican presidential hopeful Michele Bachmann erroneously said that the country's founding fathers opposed slavery, and was wrong about the town where the American Revolution began; while Tea Party favourite Sarah Palin, who recently declared that she would not seek the Republican nomination, said American patriot Paul Revere rode through the countryside at the beginning of that war to warn the British - not, as was actually the case, his fellow colonial rebels - to arm themselves), their supporters respond by trying to change Wikipedia entries to make the candidates appear correct.

Public debate is being monopolised by what Barney Frank, a Harvard University-educated Democratic congressman, has called "morally stupid bigots". (Frank, who was once reprimanded by the House of Representatives for fixing parking tickets for a gay male escort, was immediately denounced by right-wing commentators as a hypocrite.)

Some politicians have even felt it necessary to apologise for taking scientifically legitimate positions. "Call me crazy," said Republican presidential candidate Jon Huntsman after confessing that he believed the widely proven ideas of global warming and evolution. This after one of his opponents, Texas governor Rick Perry, dismissed evolution as "a theory that's out there", and one with "some gaps in it".

This state of affairs is itself evidence of "a kind of know-nothing anti- intellectualism that is shockingly pervasive, outrageous and dismissive of scientific opinion", says Gerald Graff, professor of English and education at the University of Illinois at Chicago and author of the 2003 book *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind*.

Belief has been replacing knowledge as the basis for debate, says Gregory Dimitriadis, professor of educational leadership and policy at the University at Buffalo, the State University of New York and author of *On Qualitative Inquiry: Approaches to Language and Literary Research*.

"There's been a general debasement of the idea of evidence, the idea that looking at the facts can teach you something that you don't know that forces you to rethink your position," Dimitriadis says.

"In a sense, belief systems have become more important than evidence" - including in-campus cultures that encourage diversity - helped along by "that notion that everyone's belief system is OK. We have this notion of balance, that your belief is as good as my belief. I believe that global warming is caused by X, and you believe that global warming is caused by Y."

Expanding on this theme, Graff says higher education seems to have abandoned the concept of argument. "I blame the educational system for contributing to the flood of undigested information," he says.

"What would focus that information for students would be well-focused debate. Controversy clarifies. But educational institutions fail to take advantage of presenting controversy."

Academics, in their research and writing, practise robust debate, Graff says.

"But when we go into our classrooms, we don't. In theory, higher education is an argument culture; it (certainly) is in our publications and conferences, but not in the curriculum. I suppose it's rooted in a certain fear that, as we become more diverse in higher education, we don't really know how to negotiate disagreement."

But according to Odysseas Katsaitis, head of the department of economics at the American College of Greece in Athens, it's not just what academics have said or done that has invited public scepticism, it's what they have not said.

In his country, Katsaitis says: "How many Greek economists objected to the catastrophe that was coming? Why didn't they say anything? Because they were public servants. They kept their mouths shut. I'm not saying the academics were not aware of this (impending crisis). Of course they were. They never made their voices heard. So why should the public believe us now?"

As with the US debt debate, Katsaitis says, there is an incontrovertible reality in Greek economics: the number of public servants must be trimmed, and pensions have to be reduced. But people refuse to believe it, he says in an interview delayed briefly by yet another public-sector strike.

"They say, 'Why didn't you tell us that three years ago?' There is a truth. There's an absolute truth. It's what common sense says right now. But why should you believe me? That is the issue - the issue of credibility of academics."

At best, people shop around among the thinkers and experts for a perspective that supports their own, says Russ Crawford, assistant professor of history at Ohio Northern University. Any intellectual who advances an idea, it seems, can be contradicted by another intellectual, he says.

"Maybe a way of describing this would not be anti-intellectualism, so much as having access, in the information age, to an intellectual buffet where we can choose the intellectuals who fit our tastes."

Norbert Bilbeny, professor of ethics at the University of Barcelona, sees the same phenomenon in Spain. "This is a climate we are all sharing now, of ignorance," Bilbeny says. "This is also the case in Greece, in Portugal, in Italy. People prefer now to believe what they wish to believe - to think that their opinion is the best one and that other opinions are not significant or meaningful. This reinforces our illusion of security, our illusion of control."

Just as belief has supplanted knowledge, personal experience has been substituted for informed judgement, says Leila Brammer, associate professor of communication studies at Gustavus Adolphus College in Saint Peter, Minnesota. Last winter, she says, she overheard a revealing conversation between two people discussing global warming:

"What about last Tuesday? My truck didn't start. It was the coldest day in December I ever remember. My truck always starts. The scientists must be wrong.'?"

Brammer says: "How do you refute personal experience? When arguments are based in the personal, questioning the evidence is questioning the person."

She continues: "The simple truth is that the personal-experience argument makes argument accessible to everyone. It is compelling and easy, requires no research or work or reading, and ultimately makes it nearly impossible to engage in the meaningful deliberative discourse necessary to solve global and local problems. Unfortunately, via the media, the US has exported this to the world."

One of Brammer's colleagues agrees. "The suspicion of the intellectual is not just an American phenomenon," says Jillian Locke, who teaches political science at Gustavus Adolphus and studies the rise of incivility.

"It's built into democratic and anti-democratic mythology, whether we're talking about the story of Socrates, who was supposedly put to death by the democratic masses because they couldn't handle the truth he delivered, or Rousseau, who lamented the Enlightenment and its worship of scientific reason."

And what's happening on campuses, many academics say, is doing little to reverse this drift.

"The average level of education keeps going up," says Richard Parker, a University of Oxford-educated economist and lecturer in public policy at the Shorenstein Center at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government. "You have a culture that's had trillions of dollars invested in it in terms of education. What you'd want to think is that increased average education would in some ways remove some of this kind of

prejudice."

But inside universities, he finds: "The insecurity about money is rampant. I remember speaking to a group of Harvard undergraduates about career choices and thinking I was talking to a room full of seniors about to graduate; but, no, they were sophomores that Harvard was prepping to make career decisions at the age of 19."

It's not just the students who think this way, he says.

"For teachers of mine in the 1960s to think that they would grab patents for themselves that would normally be turned over to the university would be unimaginable," Parker says.

Today, he notes: "The very nature of this institution not only makes it an economic engine, but submits it to even further discipline by the laws of neoclassical economics."

Academics, he says, "have borrowed the language of marketing and merchandising. They talk about branding themselves. Within the realm of truth-telling, the question often becomes, 'How quickly can I monetise truth?'"

This attitude has been propelled by the spiralling cost of higher education. Students, families and taxpayers expect to gain more than just knowledge from increasingly expensive university degrees. Like Parker's Harvard sophomores, they want jobs.

High costs, in turn, have driven yet another trend. Seven in 10 US university students said that on at least one occasion, they had not purchased a required textbook because the price was too forbidding, according to a survey by the US Public Interest Research Group.

"When I was going through my undergraduate programme in the 1970s, I would go into a course and we'd have five or six different books," says **George Haley**, professor of marketing and director of the Center for International Industry Competitiveness at the University of **New Haven**.

"Now, because of the cost involved, most of the faculty will stick with one textbook. So there won't be that diversity of opinion, that diversity of perspective that you used to get."

There's another reality that makes experts vulnerable, says Haley - especially economists.

"We do have a weakness, and that is that academics are committed to a particular philosophy and perspective. There's not one single law in business or economics that meets the scientific requirements for a law. The best we do in the social sciences is in a theory. So we have to accept that things aren't as settled as we like to think they are. We need to provide different perspectives, contradictory arguments. We need to say, well, yes, this is the law of supply and demand, but it's really a theory. We need to understand that in some instances, when you raise your price, you actually increase your demand. I went through my entire (undergraduate) programme without having one professor tell me that, but it's actually the case, especially with luxury goods."

More than anything else, students need to learn to question, he says. And that sometimes defies human nature.

"It's harder to consider two ways of looking at something," Haley says. "We are much more comfortable when there is one truth."

That's why this intellectual dark age presents an opportunity, according to Graff, who is also a former president of the Modern Language Association.

"It seems to me that the humanities are missing an important opportunity by not making the case that what we do is an important vocational skill - that learning how to formulate arguments and move around in the world of ideas is an important skill for upper management or for policymakers."

"The education system is missing a great opportunity. We should be the place where the debate gets elevated."

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