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THE PARADOX OF RATIONALLY DEFENDING IRRATIONALITY

Thomas D. Gutierrez

”Men, it has been well said, think in herds; it will be seen that they go mad in herds, while they only recover their senses slowly, and one by one.”

—Charles MacKay, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, Preface to the 1852 Edition.

The term “dumbing down” implies a trend of intellectual simplification. But, contrary to intuition, most of the usual measures of dumbness indicate America, as a collection of individuals, is actually getting less dumb. Perhaps even getting smarter. Clearly, this interpretation will depend on what is meant by “dumb” and “smart.”

In his book *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today’s Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter*¹, Steven Johnson explores this idea of how, by some measure, we are getting smarter as a culture. Modern society is more complex than ever before in history. The average person must successfully and rapidly process vast quantities of information and abstractions which would have sent even the brightest denizens of yesteryear to the limits of their cognitive abilities. And it is only getting more complex, competitive, and demanding with no sign of slowing down. Yet people routinely adapt. So, at least in this sense, there is very little “dumbing down” going on.

The word “dumb” usually means, somewhat tautologically, “not smart.” The equally vague term “smart” is frequently associated with (usually under duress after someone is forced to define it) IQ or something proportional to it. Like “dumb” and “smart,” IQ is not a term normally used in polite discussions. But, unlike the terms “smart” and “dumb,” IQ,

although somewhat arbitrarily defined, is a quantity that can be measured. Some people are naturally uncomfortable with the idea that a single number can apparently quantify qualitative intellectual traits like skill, “brains,” creativity, genius, or human potential. Yet people are still pragmatically judged and selected based on IQ for those very traits (e.g. SAT and GRE scores, which still play strongly in advancing one’s education, can be converted to IQ scores and are often thought of in those terms).

Regardless of interpretations, IQ is certainly measuring “something,” even if that “something” is merely “the ability to take an IQ test.” Nevertheless, IQ is colloquially associated with some notion of traditional intelligence: pattern recognition, timed task completion skill, mental focus, etc. While this seems like an important list of traits-for-success-and-competence, it isn’t clear these things are necessary for a happy, skilled, productive, or competent individual. Nor does it seem to be a necessary condition for creativity or brilliant breakthroughs.

Unlike “dumbness” or sensations of cultural “dumbing down,” trends in IQ can be studied and quantified. Perhaps surprisingly, IQ seems to be actually increasing with time; society does not seem to be leaking IQ into the ether. The Flynn Effect² is a well-measured, albeit controversial, systematic increase in average IQ relative to the past. The data show a roughly linearly rising trend despite accounting for various distortions like exam difficulty, cultural biases, etc. The effect is not well understood and almost everyone who hears about it forms an instant hypothesis on the subject. With no shortage of opinions and ideas, a single cause cannot easily be identified as the driving mechanism.

In society-is-getting-dumber polemics, like Steven Allen’s book *Dumbth*³, people point to computer games, TV, or the Internet as sources of generic dumbness. Early computer games like Pong, Donkey Kong, or Pac Man, although they had their charm, were rather low-hanging fruit for this sort of argument. Certainly there are many manifestly silly and “dumb” games, TV shows, and web sites. Is this really much different than in the past?

Some things are different. Although counterintuitive, many of the most popular computer games over the last 10 or 15 years like Tetris, Myst, Sin City, The Sims, Civilization, Star Craft, World of Warcraft, Eve Online, and Portal are exceptionally complex and nuanced games. Some, like World of Warcraft and Eve Online, are frequently played by hundreds of thousands of people against each other, every day, at all hours, all around the world. With an engaging dystopian plot, the wildly popular and award winning 2007 game Portal requires the player to solve puzzles in a real time, first person, M. C. Escher-esque “three”-spatial-dimension environment with mathematically accurate physics. Bioshock explores, again in a simulated first person 3D environment, a surreal and violent underwater version of Ayn Rand’s world view. Even games like Guitar Hero require intense levels of concentration and hand-eye coordination. Although “mindless”

computer games still do exist, they rarely obtain any measure of success because today's multi-billion dollar gaming market simply won't support them for long. Most modern gamers instinctively seek out complexities and challenges that push them to their intellectual, and sometimes physical (twitch response), limit. We are a long way from Space Invaders at the pizza joint circa 1981, even if the dopey expression on the gamer's face sometimes looks the same. There are certainly some very dumb games, but this rise in complexity for the typical popular game is definitely not a trend in "dumbing down."

TV has shown some positive intellectual trends as well. It has come a long way since the charming and simple entertainment of *I Love Lucy* and *Three's Company*. Although perhaps offending individual tastes, popular shows like *The Office*, *Lost*, *Man vs. Wild*, *Penn and Teller's Bullshit!*, and even *American Idol*, require surprisingly high cognitive demands to fully enjoy. Many of the most popular shows encourage and reward intense concentration, the ability to make subtle connections, finding patterns, solving puzzles, and the ability to memorize highly detailed information spanning time scales of weeks, months, or even years. And the real time information in these shows often comes fast and non-linearly. Reality shows like *Survivor* and *American Idol* add a degree of socio-political and personal engagement that far surpasses typical shows of the golden era of TV. Online social networking trends like Facebook and MySpace, and associated telcom technologies like Blackberries, e-mail, and text messaging, engage superior multitasking skills and the ability to think quickly and logically in a sometimes non-linear information space. These skills in the past have traditionally been associated with raw intelligence and complexity processing, yet we now take them for granted. People growing up with these tasks perform them as effortlessly as people in the mid-twentieth century used the telephone.


But there seems to be a paradox. The data show people are getting smarter by some traditional measures of intelligence, but yet many people still have this distinct sensation our culture is getting dumber. Some of it is subjective. Based on the unintended message of Allen's *Dumbth*, it is clear what people generally mean by "dumb" is really just a reaction to other people not behaving how we personally would like them to behave. The late Steve Allen was a sharp polymath, but this book is nothing more than a curmudgeonly rant. The "get off my lawn" or "kids these days" subjective grumblings certainly plays a role in some interpretations of "dumb." This sensation is sometimes fleeting, based on our own internal standards at an instant in time, which often have no objective basis. Labeling people "dumb" and accusing society of "dumbing down" may also be some kind of psychological defense mechanism. Paraphrasing the words of George Carlin, people who drive faster than us are "maniacs" and people who drive more slowly are "idiots."⁴ That subjective sentiment obviously applies to the notion of "dumbness" to some degree.

But it is natural to wonder if there is also some objective component to the "dumb-

ing down” sensation. Some of this feeling arises because there is often an assumption that traditional intelligence, as measured by IQ and quick and pragmatic multi-tasking, should also involve a strong component of mental consistency and critical thinking, part of the latter being the ability to assess the validity and quality of new information. But it doesn’t. Intelligent people routinely exhibit inconsistent thinking, able to have weird beliefs and hold essentially multiple orthogonal viewpoints in their own minds without noticing. Observing this cognitive dissonance in others is disquieting, but seeing it in yourself is almost impossible. And while IQ is apparently rising, people involuntarily engage in thinking fallacies and self-deception, as is regularly documented by organizations like The Skeptics Society and The Committee for Skeptical Inquiry.⁵ As humans, we may be hardwired to, amongst other things, embrace supernaturalism and superstition in various forms to fill mysteries with a sense of certainty, even at the cost of truth. If we can artificially “solve” some mystery, fear, or nagging doubt in our mind, we can move forward with our lives undistracted. In addition, we regularly engage in selective filtering when we find events that reinforce our existing biases, and reject those that are in conflict with them. Sharp people can be manipulated by fleeting emotions and seem to tolerate incompetence and inefficiency uncritically. There is also a tendency to accept some extraordinary claims as casual truth with little or no supporting evidence, especially if it is aligned with an existing internal belief system. For example, it isn’t uncommon to encounter people who are sharp, educated individuals, who meet all the usual requirements for an ordinary, intelligent, sane person, but who believe, despite expansive evidence to the contrary, the world in its current state was actually created in an instant 6000 years ago by a supernatural being. Or who believe in the philosophical equivalent of The Flying Spaghetti Monster.⁶ Our brains are smart, but they are easily fooled both from within and without.

In his book, first published in 1841, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*⁷, Charles MacKay explored several now classic sample cases of how otherwise reasonable people behaved strangely and irrationally when acting as a group. Smart people are easily fooled en masse into scams and routinely fall into the nets of unkind or misguided charlatans. It is a strange amplification of the thinking fallacies of individuals which make such behavior possible. Individuals are often quite reasonable and charming, fallacies and all. But, reflecting MacKay’s message, put a collection of reasonable people together and they can easily precipitate into something interpreted post hoc as idiotic and surreal. Such events have been common throughout history and things are not much different now—except people are generally more educated and, if we believe the Flynn Effect, have higher IQs.

While elements of “dumbing down” may be either subjective or intrinsic to our minds, we are under no obligation to tolerate it, and shouldn’t. But as Michael Shermer noted in

Why People Believe Weird Things⁸ (p. 283) “Smart people believe weird things because they are skilled at defending beliefs they arrived at for non-smart reasons.” The objective component of the perceived “dumbing down” of America is perhaps individual weird beliefs and thinking fallacies stretched and amplified to the macro social scale, expedited and made universally available by modern technology. It may be our ironic ability to rationally defend irrationality that becomes our intellectual undoing. 

Notes

1. Johnson, Steven. *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter*. New York, NY: Riverhead Hardcover, 2005.
2. For an introduction to the Flynn Effect and associated formal references, see the Wikipedia entry at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flynn_effect
3. Allen, Steven. *Dumbth: The Lost Art of Thinking with 101 Ways to Reason Better and Improve Your Mind*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998.
4. Santos, Steven J. (director). *Carlin on Campus*. MPI Home Video, 1984.
5. To learn more about Flying Spaghetti Monsterism visit the Wikipedia entry: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flying_Spaghetti_Monster
6. The Skeptic Society and The Committee for Skeptical Inquiry can be found online respectively at: <http://www.skeptic.com/> and <http://csicop.org/>
7. MacKay, Charles. *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*. 1841; New York: Harmony Books, 1980.
8. Shermer, Michael. *Why People Believe Weird Things: Pseudoscience, Superstition, and Other Confusions of Our Time*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2002.