

## Stupidity and passivity of the masses are dangerous assumptions

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I was struck again today in my reading at two (related) assumptions that appear again and again in social/cultural theory and philosophy, to wit: People (the masses) are passive and stupid. I think these are dangerous, if not catastrophic, assumptions to bring to an analysis of what is happening today in media, culture and society.

A few thoughts...

First, we can't look at people as an amorphous mass. Technology, for one, allows us to get far more granular in understanding what people are doing and how they are behaving. Treating people as a mass is a political move designed to hide more than it reveals.

Second, people aren't stupid. Let's look at an example from science, where the contempt for laypeople ("they couldn't possibly understand what we're talking about") is rampant -- and inaccurate. Laypeople can become extremely well educated on subjects they have a personal stake in. For an excellent, well documented example of this, read Steven Epstein's book [Impure Science](#), about how AIDS activists influenced AIDS research. The assumption of stupidity here is simply an excuse not to make an attempt to explain what is happening (and therefore keeping the mystical power of science intact). Same thing goes for the cult of the "expert" vs. amateurs...

Third, people aren't passive. Look at what is happening today with blogging to see one example. Rather than being passive consumers of packaged TV content, for example, people are creating like mad online. Now, some intellectuals might sneer that what is being created is a boring body of trivia ("...who cares what someone had for lunch, and if I see another picture of a cat I'll barf..."). My response is that **they are completely missing the point!** While most people might not (at this point) be creating Knowledge (with a capital K), what they ARE creating is their digital identity. They are taking the first steps in becoming global cyborg citizens! And this, I'd argue, will have immense implications for societies and cultures around the world in the coming years.

So, I am very suspicious of theory that rides on the back of assumptions of stupidity and passivity. I am also very suspicious of theory that demonstrates technological determinism. Rather than enslaving us, technology that allows us to manage and create knowledge can only free us! We should embrace our cyborg selves.

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