

Is America as Dumb as they Say?: An Original Oratory

We all know that America is getting dumber, right? We are inundated by examples. We have the success of the show *Are You Smarter than a 5th Grader*, which has adult contestants who embarrass themselves because they can't answer simple questions like how many times the letter "E" appears in the word *Speech*. We have YouTube videos such as the infamous video last year of Miss Teen America contestant from South Carolina, Caitlin Upton. She was asked why she thinks a fifth of Americans can't locate America on the Map. She responded with some gibberish.

From this video we get the idea that 20% of Americans are soooooo stupid that they can't find on a map their own country, you know, the one that is usually fairly large . . . the one that says AMERICA really really big. Think about it, this means 1 out of every 5 people you meet in this country can't locate our country on the map. That means at least one of us in this room can't locate America on a map. And I hate to break it to you, I can. So someone else will have to fess up.

If that statistic is too outrageous to believe, it might be because it is not true.

According to a 2006 *National Geographic* study, only 6% of Americans can't locate America on a map. Now that is only 6 out of 100 people who cannot locate America, not 20 out of 100.

Yes, everyone should know how to locate their own country on a map, but according to that same study, which was conducted in 1988, 2002, and in 2006, more people now can locate their own country than ever before. So we aren't getting stupider. We are actually getting smarter.

The problem is that the media tells us we are getting stupider and we believe that we are. We ignore our progress and pass on chances of improving ourselves.

First, let's look at the reasons why this attitude is problematic. Then, we will look at some possible causes of this attitude. And finally, we will look at how we can overcome this problematic outlook on America.

I know what you are thinking. What about those International Test Scores we hear about so often? Don't American 12th graders score somewhere below 5-year-olds in Kazakhstan, or something like that?

The media *reports* that we do poorly on International Tests. But there are problems with the results. First, as a June 11, 2008 *Education Week* article points out, a nation that “encourages low-income students to stay in school will be at a disadvantage in the test-scores” (2). What the article means to say is in America we test all our students. According to the same article, China has less than 50% of secondary-age students enrolled in school—1 out 2 high school age children are not even in school to take the international tests. In India it is less than 1/3 of its secondary age is enrolled in school. Seven out of 10 high school age children in India are not in school to take the test. So one can expect a country like China and India to have a higher average.

Because of the nature of the media, they do not report the complexities of these international tests. And rather than highlighting that we educate more of our people, which is indeed a strength of American education, the media reports that we aren't first on International tests. We should be proud that we educate more people, but we focus on that we aren't first, which is statistically impossible if we are educating almost everyone.

Oh, and just because we aren't first, doesn't imply we are last. A November 11, 2007 *New York Times* article states that even our lowest-performing state, Alabama, does better on math and science tests than all but three developed nations. Of course, the focus of this article isn't that it is good news that we are fourth. Rather, the article complains about how three Asian countries are ahead of us.

Rather than pushing the positive, the media has us walk away thinking that we are failing when the truth is that we are getting better and we do really well in educating more people.

Now that we have examined the problem of the negative, many times, specious, reporting from the media. Let's look at what causes this problem.

This desire to think that everything is getting worse must be hardwired in us humans. For instance, in Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates railed against the act of writing things down. Socrates believed that people would come to rely on the written word and stop exercising their memories and become forgetful.

And in the 15th century, worrywarts bemoaned the Gutenberg's printing press. They worried that the having such access to the printed word would lead to intellectual laziness. Being able to rely on the easy availability of books was going to weaken people's minds.

Something inside us wants to always look back and think there was a golden age. Even people in the Renaissance looked back on the Dark Ages with nostalgia.

Besides having some hardwired desire to think everything is getting worse, the other cause is our inability to redefine what it means to be intelligent.

For instance, the infamous 2007 National Endowment for the Arts report on reading, claims that American teens don't read as much for pleasure as American teens did in 1982. This bit of doomsaying made headlines all last year.

Ah-ha. This has to be true, we thought. No one reads anymore.

And the report has some truth in it. People in America are indeed reading novels for pleasure less, but that should not imply there was ever a time where American teenagers ran home to crack open *Crime and Punishment*, *War and Peace*, or *Moby Dick*.

The report says that in 1982, 60 percent of Americans between the ages of 18 and 24 read literature outside of school. That was 6 out of every 10 people who read novels after graduating high school. In 2007, there are more than 4 out of 10 people who read novels. We have lost about 2 readers of novels.

The problem with this study, according to a July 27, 2008 *New York Times* Article, is that the literacy is changing but the definition stays the same. Kids today spend more time online reading and writing in a way that fits the workplace needs of the 21st century. Technology analysts argue that traditional literacy skills are becoming outmoded. We keep judging our intelligence on outdated definitions.

For instance, people get upset that students don't know facts like the 50 capitals of the United States. But the truth is that we don't need to rely on rote memorization anymore. We have all the information we need at the touch of a keyboard. This might be hard for some to understand, but the new emphasis is going to be on problem solving and knowledge of how to get information. Some might worry, but I think we can agree that Socrates' worries have proven to be unfounded.

And besides there being a worry that we are getting dumber, there might actually be political reasons to try to convince that we are. David C. Berliner in his book *The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Fraud and the Attack on America* argues that much of this negative reporting is a ploy by some to discredit public schools so that they can cut school funding and win tax breaks for families that want to send their children to private or religious schools. If we can convince everyone that we are leaving children behind or that Johnny Can't Read, then we can be sure that the public schools don't work. Once we reach that conclusion, we have a good argument for the institution of Charter Schools and School Vouchers.

These are three reasons that cause people to concentrate on the negative. Let's look at some ways to solve this problem.

First, we need to realize and accept that we are actually getting smarter. This might be hard to swallow, but James Flynn argues in his book, *What is Intelligence*, that the average I.Q. goes up nine points each generation. This means that my I.Q. might be 18 points higher than my grandfather's. So without even trying, people are naturally getting smarter.

If you don't believe me that people are getting smarter, just look at television. That's right, I am talking about the Idiot Box, but as it turns out according to Steve Johnson's book *Everything Bad is Good for You*, television shows are a good indicator that we are getting smarter.

For example, my grandfather was easily entertained and possibly challenged by *I Love Lucy*. This show had four main characters with one problem each episode.

But today we have shows like *Lost* and *Heroes*. *Heroes*, for example, follows the lives of over 13 characters, and each episode introduces several plots and subplots. The story lines are complicated and require the viewer to remember information from previous episodes.

TV shows today take more mental work than someone like my grandfather was capable of.

After we realize that we are actually getting smarter, we need to stop being alarmist. We need to stop telling teens that they're dumb. We need to highlight the positive and encourage them.

Today, we have looked at why this negative attitude is problematic, the causes of this attitude, and some solutions to the problem. We should remember that every time we say that kids today are getting worse, we set expectations. People behave according to expectations. If we expect people to be unintelligent, then they might just act unintelligent. We can focus on that America is getting dumb because adults can't answer questions from a 5th grade textbook, or we can praise our 5th graders for being so darn smart.