

The Power of Stupidity



by Giancarlo Livraghi

Chapter 25 – Is Stupidity Growing?

That can be a silly question. And there are some silly answers. I don't know who started spreading the idea that «*the sum of intelligence on the planet is a constant, while the population is growing*» – but the fact is that it's being repeated here and there. And, quite surprisingly, it isn't meant to be just a joke. It has also become a dogma of self-appointed groups of (so they say) “super intelligent” people.

While we can reasonably assume (though we have no way of “proving” it as a fact) that the “percentage of stupidity” is a constant (as discussed in chapters 1, 7, 9, 10 and 11) it is nonsensical (as well as grossly arrogant) to believe or suggest that a small (and proportionally decreasing) number of people has a monopoly of intelligence – and everyone else is stupid.

This peculiar way of thinking has not, so far, become the tool of a dominating oligarchy, but it's a widespread habit of people in power to assume (or pretend) that they have some sort of superior intelligence – and it's even worse when the rest of the people are lulled into believing that it might be true.¹

In Cyril Kornbluth's science fiction story *The Marching Morons* (1951) a sleazy character is unfrozen from “cryogenic storage” in a future populated by a vast majority of idiots. He becomes a leader of the “intelligent minority.” When faced with the problem of moron overpopulation, he sets up a network of tour operators offering wonderful holidays on Venus and embarking masses of “inferior” people on ships to be lost in space. At the end of the story he becomes a victim of his own scheme. It's unlikely that we are heading for any such future, but we are facing some very serious problems caused by human stupidity.

¹ Chapter 10 *The Stupidity of Power* is also online gandalf.it/stupid/chap10.pdf

It is just as silly to ask if human intelligence is growing – though some so-called “scientific” studies say that it is. We have no reliable way of “measuring” or comparing intelligence. This isn’t just because there is no clear definition of what it is, and “IQ” standards are questionable – if not totally meaningless.

Even if we had a reliable and comparable yardstick (that we don’t have) no such analysis is wide enough, by length of time, number of people and variety of culture, to be more than a fruitless academic exercise or a subjective and vague opinion.²

So can we set all this aside as pointless? Not quite. It’s worth some comment.

Anthropology, in one way or another, defines “intelligence” as a “characteristic” of a “human being.” But, even before we chose the arrogant definition *sapiens* to separate our species from other “humanoids”, there have always been doubts about the actual “sapience” of our kin – and our ability to understand, learn and improve. We made it worse when we doubled the definition, calling *sapiens sapiens* our particular breed, as separate from other “humans” who, as far as we can tell by tracing their behavior, weren’t necessarily more stupid than we are.

It’s a fact that science, especially in the last four centuries, and even more so in recent years, has largely expanded the frontiers of knowledge. It’s as fascinating as it is bewildering.

Our perceptions are potentially more advanced than they have ever been, but perspectives are often biased.³

It’s hard to tell if, when and how this is making us more intelligent (or more confused – and therefore more stupid.)

On the other hand, large and small events confirm, every day, the dismal effects of human stupidity. Many problems are going from bad to worse. But what we may perceive as “the good old times” wasn’t as good as nostalgia, sometimes, is dreaming. Simplistic as this is, it’s reasonably practical to assume that we are as stupid as we have ever been. The sheer fact that our species has, so far, survived and expanded, in spite of its appalling mistakes, proves that we are not completely stupid. But it’s painfully obvious that our resources aren’t good enough for the state of evolution in which we are now.

The problem is in the environment. The number of people has increased much faster than it ever did in past history. Wider and faster transport and communication have made us more invasive, while we haven’t had the time (or the vision) to adjust to these circumstances.

Human development has always changed the environment. But, as long as people were few and far apart, when resources were exploited, destroyed or poisoned they could just move to somewhere else. Now we can no longer depend on such nearsighted behavior.

² Getting into the details of those studies would be as boring as it is irrelevant. It’s pretty obvious that if we try to measure what “was” a level of “intelligence” by criteria based on today’s environment, we will automatically find that the average was “lower.” As the criteria are basically influenced by educational standards, ironically a country with a higher level of literacy ten or twenty years ago has a relatively poor “improvement” score. Such ridiculous mistakes have actually happened.

³ See chapter 21– also online gandalf.it/stupid/chap21.pdf

Of course there are problems of cultural environment that are as serious as the physical state of the thin layer on the surface of our planet that is the world where we live.

Some people are nostalgic about stupidity. Thirty years ago an ironic – but seriously critical – Italian writer, Leonardo Sciascia, wrote: «*A sort of melancholy, and regret, seizes us every time we meet a sophisticated, adulterated idiot. Oh the nice fools of yestertime! Genuine, natural. Like homemade bread.*»⁴

Strangely enough, there are other writers, in recent years, saying the same sort of thing. Of course they are joking, but there is a fairly widespread feeling that stupidity is becoming more devious. This isn't really changing – it has always been so. But the abundance of information is making it more obvious.

It's becoming obsessively irritating that we are so often inundated by a growing tide of arrogant stupidity. Four hundred years earlier, Michel de Montaigne had summarized the problem quite clearly. «*Nobody is exempt from saying stupid things, the harm is to do it presumptuously.*»

There is nothing new in the abundance of presumptuous idiots. We are just more often aware of their presence (and the results of what they are doing, not only saying.)⁵

Confusing cunning with intelligence (chapter 17) is another way of multiplying the power of stupidity. As Francis Bacon said, «*There is nothing more damaging to a country than shrewd people passing themselves off as being intelligent.*» It's even worse when this delusion is shared on a large scale.

There is a real danger that so frequent evidence of how people who are supposed to be bright and wise are awfully stupid can lead us to resignation and selfishness. But it doesn't work. The tide of stupidity will catch up with our little raft no matter where we think it's drifting.

The appalling size of “globalized” stupidity is particularly obnoxious in the case of problems that were quite obvious, but were allowed to grow, and now are so entangled that it's much more difficult to find a solution (as explained in chapter 3.)

The most visible, but not the only one, is the financial crisis, that was a serious and easily diagnosed infection twenty years ago, but was allowed – actually encouraged – to spread until it became a catastrophic epidemic. It will take years to understand if the world's leaders and opinion makers will be able to learn from this experience or will again do more of the same. Or, maybe, plunge into some other disastrous blunder.

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⁴ In *Nero su Nero*, 1979. Included in *Opere*, Bompiani, 1989.

⁵ See chapter 26 *Stupidity isn't Harmless* – online gandalf.it/stupid/chap26.pdf for some interesting comments on glorified stupidity by another bright Italian writer, Ennio Flaiano. The “pompous ass”, of course, has always been a well known character, as we learn from comedy and tragedy, history and irony, thousands of years ago. But the fast contact that we now have with remote environments, while it's basically an interesting and stimulating resource, can make it more difficult to tell the difference between meaningful culture and unfamiliar nonsense.

For lack of any better criterion, let's stay with the simple "postulate" that the stupidity factor is a constant in humankind. So human stupidity is growing because there are more of us. And, just as infectious diseases and destructive pests travel on airplanes, the contagion of stupidity rides the fast waves of worldwide communication.

In other words, we are not becoming more (or less) stupid, but the power of stupidity is increasing. The problem is in the vastness of the consequences, that has never been so large – and in the speed of their multiplication. We can't uproot stupidity. But, the more we understand it, the closer we can get to reducing its impact. And that is what this book is all about.

A description of the book
is online – stupidity.it