



## Understanding Human Stupidity in a Post-truth Area

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries  
INSEAD, [manfred.ketsdevries@insead.edu](mailto:manfred.ketsdevries@insead.edu)

Most people, at one time or another, act stupidly. There are any number of terms used to describe stupid behavior: stupidity, dumbness, silliness, obtuseness, imbecility, foolishness, folly, and idiocy, to name just a few. This article starts by describing some of the characteristics of stupidity and then posits the idea that people who behave stupidly seem to be—temporarily or otherwise—unable to properly navigate the domains of reasoning, planning, problem solving, abstract thinking, complex ideas, and learning from experience. Aside from stupidity being, at times, downright dangerous, it can come with the additional difficulty of being somewhat contagious.

That these people often appear to be stubborn and self-possessed also suggests a narcissistic aspect to some instances of stupid behavior, and this article later raises the question as to whether some individuals are really stupid or whether some of them adopt a pseudo-stupidly for their own ends.

Adopting an evolutionary perspective, the article suggests that, in people's attempts to make sense of the world, irrationality often overrules rationality. For example, in their pursuit of sense making, people may feel compelled to hold onto stupid beliefs or subscribe to bizarre ideas in a bid to ward off feelings of anxiety about the unknown. In this context, it is suggested that human beings, fearful as they can be, are easily manipulated by people in leadership positions. In fact, the world is full of Pied Pipers trying to lead them astray.

In the context of stupidity, the conundrum of limited rationality is also explored. It is noted and illustrated through various examples that people's cognitive biases often enhance stupid decisions. The propositions of cognitive psychologists and findings derived from neuroscience are touched upon as highly relevant here.

This article observes that the present age resembles a post-truth era, one in which, thanks to the machinations of social media, stupidity appears to be celebrated. Elaborating on this observation, it considers the influence that supposedly stupid people exert over large groups, all too easily setting the stage for collective stupidity. As will be shown, people who are able to harness the power of other people's stupidity can have an enormous impact. Here the pseudo-stupidity first discussed, must be taken seriously, asking how far these supposedly stupid leaders deliberately incite their followers towards stupidity.

In its conclusion, this article suggests a number of means by which to manage stupidity, even when it appears to be an insurmountable task. It cautions that no amount of persuasion is able to change the minds of some stupid people, particularly when they are unaware of their idiocy. Despite the challenge this poses, the article emphasizes that efforts do still need to be made to counteract stupidity. Education measures can help stupid people to question their logic with the hope that self-knowledge may be a useful antidote. In addition, the article points out that, from a societal perspective, a major countervailing power against stupidity is the presence of institutional safeguards. Here satire is proposed as just one form of intervention, as well as the use of paradoxical psychology. We can all be stupid, but can we be so safely?

Keywords: Stupidity; Pseudo-stupidity; Foolishness; Contagion; Stubbornness; Narcissism; Evolutionary Psychology; Cognitive Psychology; Cognitive Bias; Neuroscience; Group Dynamics; Leadership; Satire; Paradoxical Intervention; Education; Self-knowledge

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*We are all born ignorant, but one must work hard to remain stupid.*

—*Benjamin Franklin*

*The world is so full of simpletons and madmen, that one need not seek them in a madhouse.*

—*Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*

*It is only because of their stupidity that they are able to be so sure of themselves.*

—*Franz Kafka*

## **Heaven and hell**

It has been said that even though many wise people cannot create heaven, it only takes one fool to create a hell on earth. Giving power to a fool was something Prussian general Kurt von Hammerstein-Equord found particularly dangerous. Reflecting on the behavior of his soldiers, he would divide them into four types: the clever, the industrious, the lazy, and the stupid. According to his categorization, each soldier would always possess two of these characteristics. Having ascertained their personality makeup, the general's challenge was how to make the best use of his people. Thus, after an assessment, he would appoint the ones who were clever and industrious to the General Staff. The ones who were lazy and stupid (a cohort that the general estimated to make up 90 percent of an army) were, according to him, quite suited for routine duties—the infantry being an excellent area to place them. Soldiers who were clever and lazy were qualified to take on the highest leadership positions with the belief that they possessed the intellectual clarity

and composure to deal with even the most complex issues. However, the soldiers the general was most wary of were the stupid and industrious. In fact, he believed this grouping to be extremely dangerous, to the extent that they shouldn't be entrusted with any responsibility, would always cause trouble, and should therefore be gotten rid of.

Clearly, the general subscribed to the rule that what could easily be attributed to malice could also be reasonably explained by stupidity. He had learned that not only were stupid people dangerous, but that their behavior could also be highly contagious. Like the expression that foolish sheep make wolves their confessors, he noted that foolish people had a potentially disturbing effect on others. Essentially, stupid people can be just stupid, but only as long as they keep their stupidity to themselves. When they begin to influence other people, however, they're entering another dimension. Having learned from experience, it is clear that the general took human stupidity very seriously. He knew that stupid behavior could have catastrophic consequences.

### **What are stupid people like?**

We needn't look far to see that few things are more common than human stupidity. In fact, if we take an objective look at our world, we appear to be surrounded by people behaving stupidly. What's more, human folly is not limited to a select few. Most of us, at one time or another, have acted stupidly. It is inevitable therefore that so many descriptors remain in circulation: stupidity, dumbness, silliness, obtuseness, imbecility, foolishness, folly, and idiocy, to name just a few. What such terms concur is that stupid people

demonstrate their idiocy by embarking on remarkably stupid acts which inevitably makes other people aware of their stupidity.

What we may discover is that these people seem to be incapable of properly navigating the domains of reasoning, planning, problem solving, abstract thinking, complex ideas, and learning from experience. What is troubling however, is that these peoples' actions are often devoid of mature judgment or reflective thinking.

### *An intelligent mask*

An additional, rather disconcerting factor is that stupid acts are often committed by people who, at first glance, seem to be quite intelligent. In fact, many highly intelligent, knowledgeable people are known to have done extremely stupid things and with some regularity; activities with the potential to be disastrous.

On the basis of such behavior, it appears that *real* stupidity can also be the hallmark of frightening intellectual complacency. It is these individuals' lack of reflectivity that is responsible for their stupid actions. It is frequently the case that nobody would label people as complete idiots until the consequences of their actions prove them to be so. Only with the benefit of hindsight do others recognize that the people that they have been dealing with were idiots all along. In other words, stupidity has very much to do with the choices people make. Rational decision-making doesn't seem to be their forte.

## *Stubbornness*

Another quality commonly seen in stupid people is stubbornness. All too frequently, they will ardently cling to their opinions regardless of how off-track they may be. The Roman statesman and philosopher Marcus Cicero once commented on this personality characteristic when he said, “any man can make mistakes, but only an idiot persists in his error.” Unfortunately, what appears to be the case, is that these people don’t realize *how* ignorant they really are—they engage in stupid acts with real self-assurance. This suggests is that there may well be a narcissistic element to their behavior. When in tandem with self-delusional patterns, the combination is mutually reinforcing, only binding the individual further to their behavioral habits—their state of stupidity.

An example of this might be if an individual were to be offered an exciting educational opportunity, only to decline it on the defeatist grounds that the program doesn’t contain anything new. All too often, when life offers these people the possibility to grow, and change, they seem to be incapable of breaking free of their old habits. Instead, and arguably stupidly, they prefer to hang onto the tried and tested, instead of the new and exploratory.

Another example of stupidity, this time in the political domain, might be a situation whereby a group of people believe that one party (of course, their party) is utterly virtuous and indisputably correct on specific issues. Meanwhile, the other party is viewed to be completely evil and always wrong. Obviously, such people are unable to accept shades of gray; they are incapable of considering an alternative perspective. In such cases, stupid

people regrettably lack the mental resources that might allow them to recognize their own imbecility. And what we may have discovered the hard way is that most fools deny their own foolishness and underestimate their stupidity.

### *Pseudo-stupidity*

What should be addressed here, is that there may be such a thing as pseudo-stupidity, referring to people that deliberately behave stupidly for ulterior motives, most usually to mislead others and get what they want. There are many instances in which smart people who don't want to stand out opt to 'play dumb' as a way of staying under the radar.

### **Human stupidity makes the world go round**

Fundamentally, humans have seldom been known for their wisdom; on the contrary, the history of humankind has always been a struggle between wisdom and stupidity. As William Shakespeare said so appropriately, "Lord, what fools these mortals be." Or to quote the German humanitarian Albert Schweitzer, "man is a clever animal who behaves like an imbecile." What is most worrisome—reflecting on the history of humanity—is that stupidity has a knack of repeating itself. Calamity after calamity has occurred when we, the human race, should have learned from recent history and known how to avoid destructive actions.

What maintains stupidity in humans is actually the very same thing that has allowed our evolution—the pervasive desire to explain the inexplicable. Throughout our evolution history has exposed humans to many dangers and people have always sought

explanations for events perceived to be 'mysterious'. In these situations, irrational beliefs would frequently overrule rationality, so long as it offered a form of explanation for strange phenomena. Furthermore, as an anxiety-prone species, humans are both anxiety-prone and gullible as a species. This means we are experts at transmitting both anxiety and irrationality to others.

### *Touch wood and lucky numbers*

Some humans seem only too willing to believe the craziest ideas, so much so that others may question their sanity. In an effort to make sense of the world some individuals might consult horoscopes, visit 'psychics,' believe in the miracles of Chinese medicine, advocate homeopathic cures, explore black magic and voodoo, and believe in ghosts, spirits, demons, and angels. Others repeatedly search out 'lucky' numbers for the lottery, fear walking under ladders or opening umbrellas indoors; others still swear by palm reading or knock on wood for good luck—all repetitive behaviors and beliefs of puzzling origin and purpose.

What is more, homo sapiens are particularly susceptible to conjuring retrospective explanations that prove them to have been right all along. They then continue to hold onto their strange beliefs regardless of the price they may pay or harm they may inflict. Particular modes of magical thinking come to the fore when pursuing big ideas of the kind upheld by many religious movements, ideologies, and cults. Although some of these ideologies and religious orientations can provide great comfort to people, they also often tend to negate any form of rationality. Thus, although all of us may be prone to a certain

degree of idiocy, ideologically driven people show more of this tragic quality—and the superstitious particularly are led by it.

It is no wonder that ideologies have been referred to as ‘the science of idiots,’ or, to quote the American science fiction writer Isaac Asimov, “there is no belief, however foolish, that will not gather its faithful adherents who will defend it to death.” Again, what the obstinate persistence of strange beliefs proves is that no human being is immune or unfamiliar with some kind of absurd belief system. In fact, anxiety prone as people tend to be, they are always searching for some form of causality and meaning. In the context of humanity, logical delirium seems to be ever-present.

### **The question of limited rationality**

Being a complex and controversial subject, stupidity has been explored from any number of different angles. It has garnered significant interest from philosophers, sociologists, and psychologists, in particular. Taking the perspective of psychologists, stupidity has often been looked at as the outcome of cognitive biases or errors in judgment.<sup>1</sup> In fact, most of the explanations given by prominent psychologists refer to Homo sapiens’ cognitive limitations, deeming these a causal factor for beliefs that defy rational logic and lead to stupid actions.

Fortunately, research on human cognition and decision-making has helped us to better understand the reasons why such strong biases occur. These findings have made it clear

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Arieli (2009). *Predictably Irrational, Revised and Expanded Edition: The Hidden Forces That Shape Our Decisions*. New York: HarperCollins.



that people are anything but rational, optimizing machines. As Herbert Simon, a Nobel Prize winner of economics, concluded through his writings that humans have significant limitations in the context of rationality.<sup>2</sup> Daniel Kahneman, the Israeli psychologist and yet another Nobel Prize winner corroborated this, and observed that people think fast and slow—meaning fast, intuitive thinking, and slow, rational thinking—depending on the situation.<sup>3</sup>

Neuroscientists have also joined the fray, identifying that the frontal lobes of our brain (the source of rational thinking) are easily overruled by the more primitive mechanism of the amygdala—the core of the neural system needed for processing threatening stimuli.<sup>4</sup> Essentially, this differentiation between fast and slow decision-making implies that there are situations when slow, deliberate information processing will be inappropriate. In emergency situations, when faster decision-making is required, those slow, more calculated decision-making processes are overruled. But long before cognitive psychologists and neuroscientists studied such patterns, the French writer Francois Duc De La Rochefoucauld noted that “Passion often makes fools of the wisest men and gives the silliest wisdom.”

### *Cognitive biases*

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<sup>2</sup> Herbert Simon (1947). *Administrative Behavior: A Study of Decision-Making Processes in Administrative Organization*. New York: MacMillan.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Kahneman (2012). *Thinking Fast and Slow*. New York: Penguin.

<sup>4</sup> Rupa Gupta, Timothy R. Koscik, Antoine Bechara, and Daniel Tranel (2011). The amygdala and decision-making, *Neuropsychologia*, 49(4), 760–6.

With these decision-making differences in mind, one cognitive bias frequently observed in relation to stupid behavior is the *confirmation bias*. We tend to favor information that confirms our pre-existing beliefs or hypotheses while ignoring or dismissing contradictory information. Another regularly occurring cognitive bias that could lead us astray in the context of decision-making can be described as *anchoring*, meaning that we are often influenced by the first piece of information that we receive (the ‘anchor’) when we’re making decisions, even when this information turns out to be completely irrelevant or arbitrary.

Furthermore, human beings are prone to the *overconfidence effect*, in which we overestimate our abilities, knowledge and the accuracy of our beliefs. In other words, even though things may not turn out the way we had expected, we fail to see that what has happened is the result of our *own* actions. Not only this, but stupid people also fail to recognize competence in other people.

Continuing this examination cognitive biases in the context of stupidity, what is referred to as the *fundamental attribution error* is also relevant. Here, people will attribute the behavior of others to internal factors (e.g., personality) rather than to external factors (e.g., situational influences) in an effort to make sense of apparently idiotic behavior.

Another way still to explain stupid decisions is through the potent dynamics of *groupthink*, in which groups of people will value consensus and conformity over critical evaluation—another bias that contributes to flawed decision-making.

Other terminology includes the *sunk cost fallacy*, in which we continue to invest time, money, or resources in a project or endeavor beyond the point where it makes sense to, and *availability heuristic* when we may rely on readily available information, even when this information is not representative or even statistically inaccurate. In other words, we may see causality where there is no correlation.

These various cognitive biases—confirmation bias, the overconfidence effect, fundamental attribution error, groupthink, the sunk cost fallacy, and the availability heuristic—are means by which we simplify decision-making, enabling us to make quick decisions in stressful situations. Again, from an evolutionary perspective, our prehistoric ancestors who lived in at a time when quick decisions could mean the difference between life and death, were conditioned to respond quickly. Slow deliberation could be deadly. They were inclined to take action, any kind of action, however appropriate or otherwise idiotic such an activity turns out to be. Consequently, we still exhibit all the responses of that evolutionary legacy where, at any point in time, fearful situations can make complete idiots out of us. All too easily, we are triggered to a flight or fight response—an archaic behavior pattern seen over and over again in our contemporary society.

Of course, with this greater knowledge of such primitive cognitive limitations, we should recognize that, in many contexts, these biases are not entirely indicative of veritable stupidity. Rather, they are the result of cognitive tendencies to which we are all susceptible. But what it is also arguable is that the degree of insight now available, should

make us more aware of our own cognitive biases, especially given that they can be the source of personal miseries. Unfortunately, however, despite cognitive stupidity being something we all have in common, there are those who insist they are entitled to improve on it.

### **Stupidity in the digital age**

As this brief historical overview might suggest, when it comes to stupidity, people appear to have a very slow learning curve. The journey towards stupidity seems to be never-ending. In fact, ours might be considered the golden age of stupidity and, thanks to the explosive rise of social media, human follies have become more visible than ever. People who we might only have suspected of idiocy are now giving us ample evidence, as the Italian writer Umberto Eco points out: “social media gives legions of idiots the right to speak when they once only spoke at a bar after a glass of wine, without harming the community ... but now they have the same right to speak as a Nobel Prize winner. It's the invasion of the idiots.” Social media seems to be promoting stupidity, and too many journalists have turned into megaphones for it. Many of the people who contribute to these technological platforms are broadcasting at best inane, but often stupid ideas. It is unfortunate that so many people are ready to believe them without question.

In this respect, we are living in something of a ‘post-truth’ era. We are faced daily with the kind of public discourse that is difficult to distinguish as fact or fantasy. All too easily, we are fooled by errors and lies, to the extent that the fake world is at risk of replacing the real, and with the added tool of simplistic but potent slogans

intended to maximize the 'engagement factor.' In essence, people who control the media try to reach as many people as possible in the spread of their nonsensical ideas. They know that the way to increase this engagement factor is to be outrageous in the information that's presented. It is no wonder that these social media platforms have become the ideal outlet for cultish beliefs and behavior—niche cultures, spawning conspiracy theories that rapidly become mainstream ideas.

### *Group psychology*

From a macro perspective, we should never underestimate the influence that one stupid individual can have. With our instinctual tendency for herd behavior, individuals will quickly mimic the people around them. As touched upon earlier, stupidity in such contexts can be highly contagious and potentially dangerous; the American polymath Benjamin Franklin once said, "to be intimate with a foolish friend is like going to bed with a razor."

Groupthink reduces the human capacity for balanced judgment—in the company of fools, we too become fools. And when a large number of people embrace an idiotic theory, it is likely that others will be compelled to conform. In these kinds of situations, the whole certainly isn't greater than the sum of its parts. Even the most ordinary, good-hearted, intelligent people may begin to believe blatantly nonsensical ideas. Consequently, we must pause to reflect whether we are ruled by smart people pretending to be idiots or by fools who really mean what they say.

Despite being aware of all this, people underestimate the number of stupid individuals in our midst. What's more, when wealth and power are at stake, the potential for stupidity is magnified. Whether people are following the antics of social media influencers such as Paris Hilton and Kim Kardashian or are seduced by the idea of instant riches through bitcoin encouraged by the likes of Samuel Bankman-Fried, stupidity seems to be celebrated. Clearly many foolish people are addicted to attention, fame, money, power, and prestige. Values we once considered to be common sense have been replaced by sheer idiocy.

More troublesome still is the fact that critical thinking has become both a liability and a threat. Not only can we observe a proliferation of stupidity—celebrity cultures that embrace the banal and the idiotic—a similar phenomenon seems to be occurring in the discourses and policies of people in leadership positions. It is as if these individuals believe that the legacy of the Enlightenment—typified by ideas of liberty, progress, toleration, fraternity, and constitutional government—is due a reversal.

We are therefore seeing an increasing number of countries being incited to follow the most stupid ideologies, irresponsible political parties, and strange social movements—activities often driven by media savvy politicians. And many of these politicians are propagating utter nonsense. The weird, the stupid, and the coarse have become the new cultural norms and, perhaps, for many, even the new cultural ideals. More worrying still, the fools who are spreading these crazy ideas seem to believe their own lies and, despite their obvious stupidity, many people are enthralled by their antics, lock, stock, and barrel.

### *Inciting stupidity*

Compounding the problem is the fact that the human species, haunted by its many fears and unintelligible reveries, has always been at the mercy of people placed in leadership positions. From their position of power these individuals have reserved the right to do the thinking for the rest of society. As the people who follow them seem to be prepared to abdicate personal responsibility, it comes as no great surprise that much of the world's misery stems from mass stupidity. People follow these leaders mindlessly, no matter how 'demagogue-like' their ideas turn out to be. We don't need to go far to recognize many crazy activities driven by idealism, dogmatism, and a proselytizing zeal on behalf of religious or political fools. People's willingness to subscribe to these leaders' crazy ideas has contributed to a great deal of human suffering.

The combination of power and stupidity has always been a heady and dangerous mix. All too often, the foolish behavior of these demagogue-like leaders upends the lives of large numbers of people. An horrendous example is currently in action in the form of the Ukrainian war. Yet, as long as there are stupid people supporting stupid leaders, the people living in those countries seemingly have little choice but to continue swimming in the cesspool created by their own foolishness. As this phenomenon occurs over and over again, it may explain why feelings of despair about the future of humankind are inevitable.

### *The Trump tragedy*

A tragic example of the contagiousness of stupidity is the playbook of Donald Trump, the former president of the United States. Given the present political scene in the US, he can be named as the leading voice of stupidity despite heavy competition from other political figures. Again, his case begs the question of who is more foolish—the fool or the people who follow him? What Trump's case makes quite clear, however, is that fools can always find greater fools to admire them. In this respect, Trump is a good example of stupidity working overtime with mind baffling results.

Unfortunately, the media and supposedly intelligent people have been complicit in Trump's rise to power. They have helped him disseminate an image of the world as a dystopia headed for great disaster. Due to the degree of social media engagement, those responsible for its content have encouraged his outrageous behavior. As a result, people's fight-flight reactions have been working overtime, which, as discussed, doesn't always make for rational behavior. As Trump has discovered and exploited, when people believe that the world is heading off a cliff, they become especially receptive to his siren song.

Trump, in taking on the mantle of the populist-demagogue, has been preaching doctrines that even *he* may realize to be untrue to people he deems to be gullible enough. Of course, through their constant reiteration it is quite possible that he is beginning to believe his own lies. Unfortunately, whatever his reality may be, the outstanding thing is that so many people keep on supporting his foolish antics. If an idiot were to tell you the same story every day for a year, might you end up believing it too? Through his theatrics, he has been able to dumb down a large segment of the US population. Many people have



been transformed into cult members. Unfortunately, they don't realize that they are all being taken for a fool; that they're partaking in an act of mass stupidity.

The tragic reality is that the number of people who harness the power of mass stupidity on a dangerous level seems to be increasing across the world. As masters of manipulation and persuasion, people like Trump possess a Pied Piper-like magic that enables them to call the tune, confident in the knowledge that many people will follow their lead. They have learned how to seduce their audiences, skilled as they are in using people's wish to believe in whatever the nonsense they're preaching.

Once more, the Trump show demonstrates the power of group dynamics, and how easily people can be swayed by the persuasive tactics of charismatic figures. Due to these psychological dynamics, leaders of this ilk will be able to exploit the psychological dynamics of a people whose judgment has become clouded by emotional factors that limit their cognitive capabilities. Consequently, the followers of these leaders conform to the actions of the group, even when these actions are stupid, and even contrary to their own best interests. In the meantime, such leaders present a stage spectacle full of myths and magic to their public, catering to their individual and collective fantasies with persuasive charisma.

In this respect, it cannot be emphasized enough how troubling it is that Donald Trump has the qualities and tactics to seduce people left, right and center. He has a position of responsibility that can lead people from a place where they were once serene into a world

of agitation, where they are compelled to partake in his frenzied rallies, to listen to his endless lies, and to contribute their money to his crooked causes. Yet, as Trump illustrates, it is the person who speaks the loudest, the person who conveys the most conviction and passion, who rules the roost. Passion not only makes idiots of the cleverest people, but also makes the biggest idiots look clever. Clearly, Trump's activities demonstrate that we should never underestimate the appeal of stupidity, particularly not when delivered with absolute conviction. In fact, the German political satirist Karl Kraus emphasized this point when he said, "the secret of the demagogue is to make himself as stupid as his audience, so they believe they are as clever as he." His followers fail to realize that their participation in such *folie des masses* (this group insanity) is an invitation for disaster. The well-known statesman Napoleon Bonaparte made the insightful remark that "in politics stupidity is not a handicap."

By signing up for stupidity, people converted by these leaders' foolish messages forget that, in today's world, the dangers of making stupid decisions have become much greater, and the stakes higher. After all, it only takes one fool with a red button and a case of abject stupidity to eradicate the whole world as we know it. Consequently, given the stupidity of increasingly more of our contemporary leaders, the civil world as we know it is fragile. This must be at the forefront of our minds when we ignore or fail to question stupidity. All too quickly, it can evolve into malice.

*A personality recipe for disaster*

Clearly, there is nothing funny about these leaders. Often, they turn out to be people without empathy, individuals who can be extremely vindictive, manipulative, and exploitative. In this respect, they exhibit many malignant narcissistic qualities—a disorder that can be defined as the most severe form of narcissism. In fact, the malignant narcissist has a more pervasive lack of empathy than would be the case for someone who merely possesses narcissistic characteristics. Aside from demonstrating grandiosity and superiority, these people also lack feelings of guilt or remorse for the damage they may cause.<sup>5</sup> Stupidity combined with arrogance and egotism is what encourages these people to do what they are doing.

When it comes to a leaders' idiotic campaigns and actions, however, it is worthwhile asking ourselves whether they're really stupid or whether they just *pretend* to behave stupidly satisfy their own needs. In other words, are they just wearing a masque of stupidity to hide their rampant narcissism? Or to quote the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, "stupidity is better kept a secret than displayed."

### **Overcoming stupidity**

The overriding question this article must address is whether anything can be done in dealing with people who behave stupidly. Can these people be converted? If that's what we set out to do, it must be with an understanding of the challenge to follow. In fact, many people have written it off as a hopeless task. For example, the American writer Mark Twain once said, "never argue with stupid people, they will drag you down to their level

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<sup>5</sup> Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries (2021). *Leadership Unhinged: Essays on the Ugly, the Bad, and the Weird*. London: Palgrave.

and then beat you with experience.” Prior to that, the German playwright Friedrich Schiller would say, “against stupidity, the gods themselves contend in vain.” What’s clear is that many people believe that no amount of persuasion will ever transform an idiot. After all, much of the time we may be dealing with people who are completely unaware of their idiocy. Based on their levels of conviction, forcing them to accept a different perspective will be out of the question, and the accusation of idiocy deflected.

### *Less is more*

In the context of cognitive biases that we touched upon previously, it has been said that the less people know, the more certain they are that they are right. On this premise it is no wonder that the people who hang onto stupid ideas are so resolute. For them, to change their opinion is not an option. The American poet James Russell Lowell sadly concurred with this tendency, saying: “The foolish and the dead alone never change their opinions.” It is exactly this overconfidence that makes such individuals so difficult to deal with, all the more so when in tandem with the narcissistic behavior previously referred to. As these people thrive on power and control, they defend their position and deny foolishness, regardless of innumerable counterarguments. Instead, they will project their stupidity onto other people, or to quote Euripides, “Talk sense to a fool and he calls you foolish.”

In fact, reasoning with an idiot can be as bewildering as it is frustrating. Most often, it will fall on deaf ears and the discussion will go nowhere. In fact, to argue against stupidity only seems to reinforce it. Worse still, the more we try to reason with these people, the

stronger they seem to get. Facts that contradict personal prejudices will be simply ignored. Arguments that are presented to show that they're wrong, will be plainly denied. Instead, fools will try to adjust the truth so that *they* don't have to adjust to it. Any facts that suggest they are wrong will be pushed aside or looked upon as trivial exceptions. These defensive responses suggest such people despise understanding and sound knowledge; they can be almost unteachable, uncoachable and proud even of their own ignorance.

In dealing with these people, rational discourse may have no effect. What is also notable is that, in conversation they do not appear as *real* people, but made up of slogans and catchwords, spell bound and immune to hard facts. Instead, blinded by their ignorance. The danger is that the mindless nature of these individuals could easily dissipate downwards, culminating in a state incited to more evil than they had once deemed possible or morally acceptable.

*"We will fight them on the beaches"*

Despite the mounting challenges, efforts still need to be made to counteract stupidity. We should not abandon all hope of being able to reason with these people. To patiently accept stupidity, in light of the possible outcomes, isn't an option. Given stupidity's contagiousness, ways need to be found to deal with such behavior. Regimes like Hitler's Nazi Germany, Maoist China, and Pol Pot's Cambodia have shown that a country will have a tremendous amount to lose when its leaders force an idiotic personal vision onto a society. Presently, a similar replay of these demagogue-disasters is taking place in

Putin's Russia. Putin and his inner circle have been actively dumbing down the Russian population, censoring stark reality and factuality through self-deception, lies, and stupidity.

### *Institutional measures*

To persuade these people of the errors of their ways, however, is not without risks. Often, it takes very little for these people to behave aggressively, and for this exact reason, it becomes even more pressing to take action.

Taking a societal point of view, a major countervailing power against stupidity is the presence of institutional safeguards. The citizens of a country need to make great efforts to create a strong civic culture. They need to establish a society in which people will be able to influence their government and have their voices heard in many different ways. In particular, a strong independent judiciary is a means of establishing boundaries against idiotic behavior. To take a very recent example from the US, we can see how this boundary setting process is working on overtime, to negate the result of and Trump's participation in the presential elections.

Further legislation will be needed to discourage these individuals from disseminating misinformation. There should be some legal recourse to prevent the spread of fake news. If false facts are presented that cause personal damage, the victims of these activities should be able and supported in beginning defamation suits.

Perhaps most importantly, measures need to be taken to prevent people from falling victim to conspiracy theories. Unfortunately, tackling disinformation in today's world can be quite a challenge, given the difficulties in defining what's permissible. Most importantly, however, whatever steps are taken in creating these laws, the greatest efforts should always be made to protect the freedom of speech.

### *Satire*

Satire may sound like an unlikely countermeasure in the battle against stupidity, however the use of absurdity can be a powerful way of challenging foolish ideas. The use of witty, humor has the potential to prompt reflection and critical thinking, ideally without being insulting or offensive. In fact, satire can be most effective when directed at powerful institutions, policies, public figures, or stupid ideologies. Its focus should be on critiquing ideas, beliefs, and actions rather than to attack people personally. It should be seen as a springboard for reflection on major policy issues—a way to question assumptions.

In this sense satire as an educational tool could be a highly effective intervention to help stupid people question their logic. Hopefully, it encourages them to adopt a more self-critical form of reasoning on what could be the start of an educational journey. The challenge is to help people develop a consciousness of their ideological limitations. However, such a discourse needs to be handled with a great deal of respect and empathy. To go head-to-head with people who hold idiotic ideas is not the answer.<sup>6</sup> Instead, it is

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<sup>6</sup> Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries (2023). How to change someone's mind. INSEAD Knowledge: <https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/how-change-someones-mind>

advisable to use constructive reasoning, provide evidence, and engage in clear communication. Personal attacks or condescension will not make for very meaningful communication. Rather there might be merit in adopting a more judo-like approach and 'bend with the resistances' when trying to convince these people to accept alternative points of view.

### *Paradoxical intervention*

Another way to deal with stupidity will be to resort to paradoxical intervention. Instead of being told to avoid specific stupid activities, the person could be encouraged to do more of them.<sup>7</sup> Of course, its use should be looked at as something akin to a 'Hail Mary' scenario and, due to its risks should be a last resort for making these people understand their stupidity. Here, the challenge is to allow people to have it their own way, contradictory as it sounds. When their activities lead to disastrous results, hopefully their foolishness may become self-evident. The expectation is that they will learn from this experience; that they will understand that their singular view may not all be completely right or clear. Even though it may be difficult for them to choose between right and wrong, it will, most likely, be less difficult to choose between sensible and stupid. The disastrous result of their actions could be an eye opener, opening up a modicum of doubt about the wisdom of their ways; doubt can be a highly effective antidote to stupidity. Thus, in the context of decision making and judgment it will be important to have these people understand that everyone has strengths but also weaknesses, themselves included.

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<sup>7</sup> L. Michael Ascher, (2002). Paradoxical intention. In M. Hersen & W. Sledge (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of psychotherapy* (vol. 2, pp. 331–338). Cambridge, Mass: Academic Press



### *General education*

Furthermore, there is always the possibility of a more general educational effort, difficult as such an undertaking can be. Simply put, educating people about the relevant issues could be an intervention that prevents stupid actions. It could be a way of counteracting excessive self-assurance and arrogance through a personal discovery of their ignorance, for as Confucius once said, “real knowledge is to know the extent of one's ignorance.” In this respect, a thriving education system will be an important countervailing force against stupidity.

In the context of knowledge management, efforts could also be made to mitigate the effects of the cognitive biases mentioned previously. Such a learning journey can be seen as yet another form of intervention. In fact, to work on critical thinking skills and training in decision-making can go a long way in counteracting stupidity. If these people recognize their cognitive biases, they may be more willing to contribute to productive discussions and gain greater insights into their behavior. Clearly, ignorant people need to be taught how to properly decode the information that they're dealing with. They need to figure out whether their own observations and the ones of others are really evidence-based. The challenge is to make them more reflective about these matters. Of course, to help them get to this point will require greater data transparency and fact checking to help them recognize all that is wrong in their deluded beliefs.

### *Self-knowledge: a virtuous cycle*

Self-knowledge can be the greatest antidote to stupidity. When people acquire a modicum of self-knowledge, it enables them to reflect on their foolish behavior more objectively. They may come to realize, after so long insisting that they are surrounded by fools, that it is in fact *they* who are the real idiotic ones. What they label as foolishness in others, may turn out to be their own ignorance. In this respect, stupidity can be seen as a resistance to logic, or the result of a poverty of mind.

Furthermore, this article has highlighted situations in which stupidity might be understood as a condition of self-idolatry, discernible particularly in individuals with narcissistic tendencies. It demonstrates that these people may be too full of themselves; that they aren't really interested in the opinions of other people. Such individuals need to obtain a more reality-based view on life and a capacity for self-criticism. With self-criticism comes the ability to be empathic—another strong antidote against stupidity—or to quote the French painter Paul Gauguin, “we never really know what stupidity is until we have experimented on ourselves.” In the public sphere, self-criticism becomes even more important, given the human tendency to externalize one's internal theatre—something many leaders tend to do—with consequences that impair the lives of a wider audience.

Generally speaking, an effective leader, whether in government, business, or any other sector, requires a combination of intelligence, knowledge, wisdom, empathy, and compassion. Further qualities that qualify leaders to make informed decisions on the betterment of society include the capacity for critical thinking, to have problem-solving skills, to be capable of dealing with complex issues, to have the ability to collaborate with

others and—most significant in this context—the ability to differentiate between fools and other people. Such a leader may not be able to entirely prevent people falling victim to crazy beliefs, but they can lead by example—one that is wildly different to that demonstrated by idiotic leaders.

### *The promise of hope*

This exploration of stupidity is not all doom and gloom. In fact, American futurist Richard Buckminster Fuller made the reassuring statement that: “Human beings always do the most intelligent thing ... after they’ve tried every stupid alternative and none of them have worked.” Perhaps we might even infer a counter argument from this, that, there are times when we actually *need* some individuals to behave stupidly. After all, historical ages have demonstrated that it has often been the court’s fool, not the foolish courtier, who proved most adept in preventing foolish people from losing their heads!

