

The shrinking public attention span fostered by video is closely tied to the second important anti-intellectual force in American culture: the erosion of general knowledge.

People accustomed to hearing their president explain complicated policy choices by snapping "I'm the decider" may find it almost impossible to imagine the pains that Franklin D. Roosevelt took, in the grim months after Pearl Harbor, to explain why U.S. armed forces were suffering one defeat after another in the Pacific. In February 1942, Roosevelt urged Americans to spread out a map during his radio "fireside chat" so that they might better understand the geography of battle. In stores throughout the country, maps sold out; about 80 percent of American adults tuned in to hear the president.

That leads us to the third and final factor behind the new American dumbness: not lack of knowledge per se but arrogance about that lack of knowledge. The problem is not just the things we do not know (consider the one in five American adults who, according to the National Science Foundation, thinks the sun revolves around the Earth); it's the alarming number of Americans who have smugly concluded that they do not need to know such things in the first place. Call this anti-rationalism -- a syndrome that is particularly dangerous to our public institutions and discourse.

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