

Medium Stupid

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In July 1, 2004, Paul Krugman gave a talk about the state of the American economy. After the significant 2001 recession, the economy had begun growing again, with increasing growth in America's economic output, or GDP. But, unlike the growth in the Clinton years, the extra money being made in America wasn't going to the average person. Instead, as the economy grew, the wages for the average person stagnated or even declined. All the extra money was going to the people at the very top.

In the press, President Bush's supporters complained that the public wasn't more happy about the growing economy Bush had given them. After all, he'd pulled the country out of a recession; normally that's good for a boost in the polls. Sadly, Americans were just too dumb to notice, Bush's supporters concluded. If only they paid more attention to the news. But what these people "are really urging," Krugman explained in his talk, "is not that the public should be smart, but that the public should be medium stupid."[†]

If the public was really "stupid" (i.e. uneducated), it wouldn't watch the news at all. Instead, it would notice it was out of work, poorly-paid, or otherwise having trouble making ends meet, and conclude that the economy wasn't doing very well. On the other hand, if the public was really smart, it'd dig deep into the numbers to find that — surprise, surprise! — for most people, the economy wasn't doing as well as the headline numbers about GDP growth would suggest. The only way for the public to buy the Bush administration spin is to be medium stupid.

The medium stupid idea has much wider applicability. Most specifically, it explains the general state that the mainstream media tries to inculcate in the public. The uneducated American has a general idea that invading other countries is probably a bad idea. The overeducated American can point to dozens of examples of why this is going to be a bad idea. But the "medium stupid" American, the kind that gullibly reads the *New York Times* and watches the *CBS Evening News*, is convinced that Iraq is full of weapons of mass destruction that could blow our country to bits at any minute. A little education can be a dangerous thing.

(Along these lines, at one point I was working on a documentary film about the evening news that would demonstrate this point. The title, *Medium Stupid*, would also be a convenient homage to *Medium Cool*.)

The same is true in school. As Christopher Hayes points out in his genius article, [Is A Little Economics A Dangerous Thing?](#), the uneducated American thinks

raising the minimum wage is a pretty good idea — after all, people deserve to be paid more than \$5 an hour. And the overeducated American feels the same way; like the dozens of Economics Prize winners who signed a petition to raise the minimum wage, they've seen the studies showing that raising the minimum wage has only a negligible effect on employment. But those who have only had Economics 101 buy the propaganda that government interference in the market will only make things worse. And, [as Hayes shows](#), this leads to bad decisions in many areas — the minimum wage being only one prominent example.

The medium stupid idea has applicability in other areas of life. The uncultured person who knows nothing about fashion doesn't mind wandering around in jeans and a t-shirt. And the overcultured person knows exactly what to wear to be hip. But medium stupid ol' me looks bad and feels bad about it.

To work, propaganda, be it from the Bush administration or the fashion industry, requires you to be medium stupid. Know too little and you never hear the falsehoods. Know too much and you can spot it for a fraud. Which side of the line do you want to be on?