

That Sounds Smart

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How do you tell if what someone is saying is smart? Most people's first instinct is to think that things they can't understand must be smart. After all, to say such things they must have learned them and aren't people who have learned more about something generally smarter than people who haven't? Thus the common phenomena of people trusting jargon-laden statements.

One problem with this method is simply that jargon can be faked. It's not too hard to make up a bunch of longish words that sound complicated. And if you don't understand them, you'll have a hard time telling whether they're real or made up.

But the more serious problem is that this method is exactly backwards. Smart people actually say things that are very simple and easy to understand. And the smarter they are, the more clear what they say is. It's stupid people who say things that are hard to understand.

Part of this is because stupid people say things that aren't true, things that aren't true don't make sense, and things that don't make sense are hard to understand. But you can also look at it from the other end: if you genuinely understand something — really, truly understand it — then it doesn't seem complicated and you can explain it rather simply.

But the larger consequence is that if you're smart the world doesn't seem very complicated. This might seem obvious, but the obvious thought is rather different. The obvious thought is: The world doesn't seem complicated to smart people. But this isn't what smart people actually think. They think the world isn't complicated, period.

This is because when they try to explain part of the world they understand to someone, they explain it clearly, and, as a result, that person now understands it. This is proof that it's not just uncomplicated for them, it's uncomplicated for everyone.

But, I suspect, for most people the world is a strange and mysterious place, governed by principles they do not understand, which affect them severely but cannot be controlled, only coped with as best as possible. This is certainly how most people regard their computers.

By contrast, when I listen to smart people some part of the world I only dimly understood or never considered becomes immediately clear. Even if I don't agree, I never have any trouble understanding. Listening to them, is like breathing pure oxygen and I cannot get enough.

This means the tradeoff between being expert and being popular doesn't actually exist. People who truly understand their subject should have no trouble writing for a popular audience. And, in fact, their writing will probably be better than that of the professional popularizers.

A good example of this was the early days of the blog *Freakonomics*. It had two writers, a successful economist and a popular journalist. The two had worked together on the bestselling book of the same name, with the general assumption that it was the journalist who had made the economist's work clear. But reading their individual posts on the blog, you could see it was the reverse: the economist was a much clearer writer than the journalist.

Another result is that you find the really smart things in unexpected and undervalued places. Smart writing won't be in formal and difficult-to-understand journal articles, but in the profanity-laced angry rants you'll find on someone's blog. That's where the smart people are, even if everybody else just thinks they're dumb.