‘Tribe before truth’: Why scientific knowledge without curiosity can be polarizing

What intellectual capacities—or if one prefers, cognitive virtues—should the citizens of a modern democratic society possess? For decades, one dominant answer has been the knowledge and reasoning abilities associated with science literacy. Scientific evidence is indispensable for effective policymaking.

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This account definitely isn’t wrong. But the emerging science of science communication, which uses scientific methods to understand how people come to know what’s known by science, suggests that it is incomplete.

Indeed, it’s dangerously incomplete. Unless accompanied by another science-reasoning trait, the capacities associated with science literacy can actually impede public recognition of the best available evidence and deepen pernicious forms of cultural polarization.

The supplemental trait needed to make science literacy supportive rather than corrosive of enlightened self-government is science curiosity.

Simply put, as ordinary members of the public acquire more scientific knowledge and become more adept at scientific reasoning, they don’t converge on the best evidence relating to controversial policy-relevant facts. Instead they become even more culturally polarized.

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What, then, should educators, science journalists, and other science communication professionals do to enlist the benefits of science curiosity?

The near-term answer to this question is straightforward: join forces with empirical researchers to study science curiosity and the advancement of their craft.

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