The Media Disease

from The New Yorker, EVERYBODY'S AN EXPERT by Louis Menand

> *Tetlock also found that specialists are not significantly more reliable than non-specialists in guessing what is going to happen in the region they study. Knowing a little might make someone a more reliable forecaster, but Tetlock found that knowing a lot can actually make a person less reliable. "We reach the point of diminishing marginal predictive returns for knowledge disconcertingly quickly," he reports. "In this age of academic hyperspecialization, there is no reason for supposing that contributors to top journals—distinguished political scientists, area study specialists, economists, and so on—are any better than journalists or attentive readers of the New York Times in 'reading' emerging situations." And the more famous the forecaster the more overblown the forecasts. "Experts in demand," Tetlock says, "were more overconfident than their colleagues who eked out existences far from the limelight."*
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> *The expert-prediction game is not much different. When television pundits make predictions, the more ingenious their forecasts the greater their cachet. An arresting new prediction means that the expert has discovered a set of interlocking causes that no one else has spotted, and that could lead to an outcome that the conventional wisdom is ignoring. On shows like "The McLaughlin Group," these experts never lose their reputations, or their jobs, because long shots are their business. More serious commentators differ from the pundits only in the degree of showmanship. These serious experts—the think tankers and area-studies professors—are not entirely out to entertain, but they are a little out to entertain, and both their status as experts and their appeal as performers require them to predict futures that are not obvious to the viewer. The producer of the show does not want you and me to sit there listening to an expert*

> *and thinking, I could have said that. The expert also suffers from knowing too much: the more facts an expert has, the more information is available to be enlisted in support of his or her pet theories, and the more chains of causation he or she can find beguiling. This helps explain why specialists fail to outguess non-specialists. The odds tend to be with the obvious.*

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To excite and attract viewers the media must be bold and unique, but most activity regresses to the mean. Boring is less marketable but more likely to be accurate.