

# Definition of a crackpot

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A crackpot is somebody who does not respect the prior literature.

The easy way to not respect the prior lit is to ignore it. For example, a few months ago, a pal of mine asked me to review a paper from a physicist about an exciting new statistical mechanics approach to economic decisionmaking. Several pages of symbols later, I realized that he was describing the logit model, which had been written up by economists somewhere around the 1960s. In fact, the author even cited the standard citation for the logit model (from the mid-70s), but failed to make the connection. He just assumed that what he had was new, and did only a cursory browse throughout the economics literature before proclaiming as much.

A great many blog comments, and comments while made over booze, are of exactly this form. You've got what may be a generally smart person, commenting on somebody else's field. But when chatting with pals, it's OK to not have the existing literature on hand, because everybody in the room is aware that nobody has any authority, and that nobody's comments on global warming or what-have-you really makes any difference. In that context, you're no fun unless you're at least a bit of a crackpot.

In a sense, every grad student is a crackpot because they just haven't had time to really read up. However, most but not all are able to recognize this and act accordingly. They inquire of others, 'I have this nifty idea; how would you propose I fit it into the existing setup?' Those who say things like 'I have this nifty idea, and it is new and wonderful' are readily (and most of the time, rightly) accused of hubris.

**Root causes** Beyond just ignoring the literature, there are the self-proclaimed revolutionaries who go out of their way to disdain the prior literature (e.g., FT Marinetti<sup>1</sup>). History talks a lot about people who brought about fundamental change, and doesn't say much about people who made incremental changes. But the biographies often fail to mention how much time the revolutionaries spent reading the literature. I may have mentioned these guys before, but Thomas Edison didn't invent the light bulb, and never claimed to; he just made (significant) improvements on the filament materials. Albert Einstein's general theory of relativity was pretty darn original, but it was based on the Lorenz Equations, which are not named the Einstein equations. Einstein was famously an outsider—he was a patent examiner, not a physicist—but he enlisted the help of other prominent physicists in hammering out his theories.

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.cscs.umich.edu/~crshalizi/T4PM/futurist-manifesto.html>

The individualistic mythos is allegedly a U.S.A. thing, but the world over has people who strive to be as self-sufficient as possible—meaning that they go out of their way to not read the literature. Further, we all have the tendency to think we’re smarter than everybody else, which often translates to either not bothering to check the literature, ‘cause it’s all dumb, or dismissing it quickly as not on track.

All of this borders on crackpot. Those individualists in the Upper Peninsula are like this, as are the people who write lengthy tracts criticizing the status quo. Every class of grad students has one or two of ‘em, who reject the literature out of hand. I think I used to be like that, once upon a time, when I was less cynical than I am now.

So the other means of being a crackpot is knowing that there has been prior work done on a subject, but just assuming that it’s all stupid. Those other people just don’t ‘get it’ the way you do. I.e., everybody else is dumber than you are.

The root of such a belief is a massive failure of theory of mind—the ability of non-autistic and non-asshole people to develop a model of what is going on in other people’s heads. Which is why *crackpot* is not a compliment.

[Most patent holders are very level-headed types, but crackpots also flock to the patenting world, because the concept of a patent is built on the idea that the recipient of the patent is smarter than everybody else and deserves to be paid for being a revolutionary. Folks like that are why I stopped reading the comments on patent blogs.]

**The academic response** So you could read the literature review of the typical paper as the ‘prove you’re not a crackpot’ section. Indicate a modest familiarity with the literature and a respect for those who came before. Then, when you say crap that’s completely off the wall, at least the reader knows that you are aware of the context in which you’re saying it.

Academics have a crackpot sensor, and it is often very sensitive. But the requirement that you be at least modestly versed in the literature can easily create the sort of inner-circle feel that many academic organizations have.

It does go too far sometimes: some people like to characterize an academic journal as an ‘ongoing dialogue,’ meaning that your contribution is irrelevant unless it centrally focuses on problems presented in the prior lit. This is where that sense of cliquishness starts to appear—especially when the lit you’re supposed to be respecting is considered to consist of the writing of a handful of star academics.

All that talk about the value of interdisciplinary research goes out the window if the key criterion for credibility is being well-versed with the existing literature by a few people. Being that I’m kinda multidisciplinary, what with articles in genetics journals and law reviews, I get the crackpot glare all the time, even though I definitely know not to claim that my ideas are not in the lit.

Anyway, there’s a balance to be struck. There are people who show up to economics seminars from their work as a know-it-all to just present their single piece of intuition as fact. They are annoying. But there’s a long ways between those guys and the people who have an active interest but are not entirely up on the inner circle’s writing.

But the policy implications are easy for those of you dealing with academics on a regular basis, because it can be easy to not set off their hypersensitive crackpot sensors: just respect the literature.