

### *On the virtues of not knowing*



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Across western society, there is a widespread understanding that effective action often depends on systematic knowledge. In practice, this involves first attempting to thoroughly understand a problem in the abstract before then engaging in the nitty-gritty of trying to solve it. This understanding presents those with the most knowledge as the most capable of acting – empowering some over others. This understanding of knowledge comes to us from the Enlightenment tradition and informs everything from how we do business, to how we view universities, to the workings of government. Yet even within so-called western society, this is not the only view of knowledge that exists.

In recent years the Enlightenment view of knowledge has come under increasing attack. Popular politicians and powerful cultural movements have derided and dismissed expert knowledge. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the extent of public scepticism surrounding science and expertise, while the Brexit vote revealed a similar disinterest in fact-checking and expert-driven narratives.

This resistance to knowledge and expertise is often dismissed as ignorant or misguided. Anthropology, however, gives us a perspective that holds back on such judgements and allows us to take seriously other ways of thinking about and valuing knowledge.

Over the past two years, I have worked closely with a group of community organisers and local organisations, collectively known as Citizens UK, who have been fighting for change on a range of issues – from a living wage to climate-change policies that put the most deprived first. In 2021, they also supported vaccination campaigns within minority communities with high rates of hesitancy. This work helped me to realise that many community organisers and experienced leaders within the Citizens UK network held a very different understanding of the value of knowledge. They weren't against expertise, but in their campaigns, they also did not believe that it was necessary to have a complete understanding of the underlying problem, and its possible solutions, before taking action. Instead, they often favoured a process of letting such understandings emerge through action.

In campaigning for the living wage, for instance, many organisers recognised that low pay was a systemic issue, but were less interested in diagnosing this wider problem than they were in getting particular employers to commit to paying their staff more. If they were able to get enough employers on board who could then also advocate alongside them for wider change, then this put them in a position to start asking bigger questions – about the structure of the economy, or about government policy. Asking these questions, however, was always tied to opening up new ways of acting. They valued knowledge in relation to what it allowed them to do. The same was true for the work organisers did around vaccine hesitancy. They didn't try to explain the 'facts' around

vaccination and Covid-19. Rather, they focused on whatever forms of understanding – community gatherings, promoting role-models, religious teachings – would make people feel empowered to act. Diagnosing or explaining everything at once was often seen as more paralysing than helpful.

The efforts of community organisers reveal a different understanding of knowledge – one which isn't anti-knowledge per-se, but one which also does not treat it as an unalloyed good, or as always empowering. Instead, such efforts weave back and forth between knowledge and action, where the value of each is seen partly in terms of its ability to support the other. The more you do, the more you can know – and knowing in this way expands what you can do. Rather than trying to work through social problems in the abstract and from a distance, in the first instance, this approach treats this working through as a part of everyday life, and as a part of fighting for change. In an era where it's become clear that the Enlightenment ideal of informed, rational thinking is wearing thin, community organising offers one model for weaving knowledge and the possibilities of everyday life back together.