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Book review: The Death of Expertise

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A new book expresses concern that the 'average American' has base knowledge so low that it is now plummeting to 'aggressively wrong'. shutterstock

I have to start this review with a confession: I wanted to like this book from the moment I read the title. And I did. Tom Nichols' *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters* is a motivating – if at times slightly depressing – read.

In the author's words, his goal is to examine:

... the relationship between experts and citizens in a democracy, why that relationship is collapsing, and what all of us, citizens and experts, might do about it.

This resonates strongly with what I see playing out around the world almost every day – from the appalling state of energy politics in Australia, to the frankly bizarre condition of public debate on just about anything in the US and the UK.

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Nichols' focus is on the US, but the parallels with similar nations are myriad. He expresses a deep concern that "the average American" has base knowledge so low it has crashed through the floor of "uninformed", passed "misinformed" on the way down, and is now plummeting to "aggressively wrong". And this is playing out against a backdrop in which people don't just believe "dumb things", but actively resist any new information that might threaten these beliefs.

He doesn't claim this situation is new, per se – just that it seems to be accelerating, and proliferating, at eye-watering speed.

Intimately entwined with this, Nichols mourns the decay of our ability to have constructive, positive public debate. He reminds us that we are increasingly in a world where disagreement is seen as a personal insult. A world where argument means conflict rather than debate, and ad hominem is the rule rather than the exception.

Again, this is not necessarily a new issue – but it is certainly a growing one.

The book covers a broad and interconnected range of topics related to its key subject matter. It considers the contrast between experts and citizens, and highlights how the antagonism between these roles has been both caused and exacerbated by the exhausting and often insult-laden nature of what passes for public conversations.

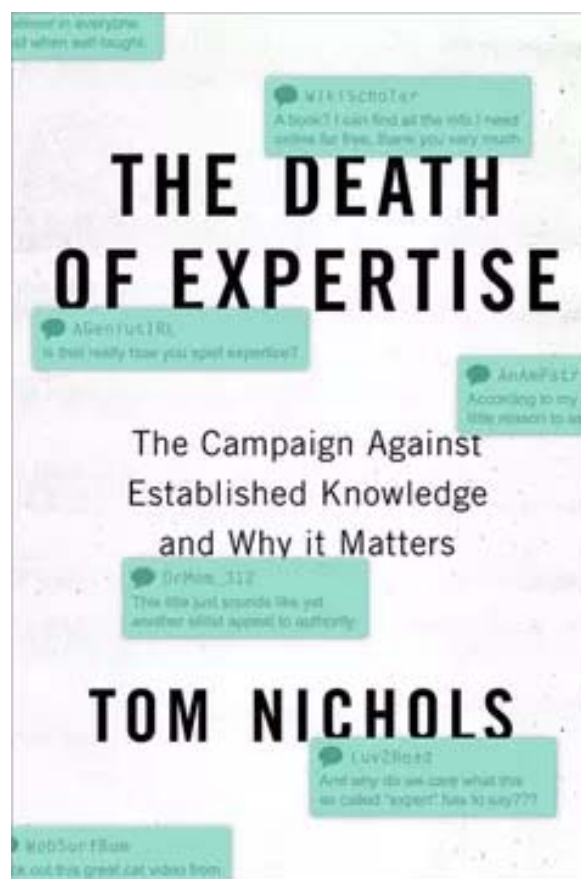
Nichols also reflects on changes in the mediating influence of journalism on the relationship between experts and "citizens". He reminds us of the ubiquity of Google and its role in reinforcing the conflation of information, knowledge and experience.

His chapter on the contribution of higher education to the ailing relationship between experts and citizens particularly appeals to me as an academic. Two of his points here exemplify academia's complicity in diminishing this relationship.

Nichols outlines his concern about the movement to treat students as clients, and the consequent over-reliance on the efficacy and relevance of student assessment of their professors. While not against "limited assessment", he believes:

Evaluating teachers creates a habit of mind in which the layperson becomes accustomed to judging the expert, despite being in an obvious position of having inferior knowledge of the subject material.

Nichols also asserts this student-as-customer approach to universities is accompanied by an implicit, and also explicit, nurturing of the idea that:



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Emotion is an unassailable defence against expertise, a moat of anger and resentment in which reason and knowledge quickly drown. And when students learn that emotion trumps everything else, it is a lesson they will take with them for the rest of their lives.

The pervasive attacks on experts as “elitists” in US public discourse receive little sympathy in this book (nor should these). Nichols sees these assaults as entrenched not so much in ignorance, more as being rooted in:

... unfounded arrogance, the outrage of an increasingly narcissistic culture that cannot endure even the slightest hint of inequality of any kind.

Linked to this, he sees a confusion in the minds of many between basic notions of democracy in general, and the relationship between expertise and democracy in particular.

Democracy is, Nichols reminds us, “a condition of political equality”: one person, one vote, all of us equal in the eyes of the law. But in the US at least, he feels people:

... now think of democracy as a state of actual equality, in which every opinion is a good as any other on almost any subject under the sun. Feelings are more important than facts: if people think vaccines are harmful ... then it is “undemocratic” and “elitist” to contradict them.

The danger, as he puts it, is that a temptation exists in democratic societies to become caught up in “resentful insistence on equality”, which can turn into “oppressive ignorance” if left unchecked. I find it hard to argue with him.

Nichols acknowledges that his arguments expose him to the very real danger of looking like yet another pontificating academic, bemoaning the dumbing down of society. It’s a practice common among many in academia, and one that is often code for our real complaint: that people won’t just respect our authority.

There are certainly places where a superficial reader would be tempted to accuse him of this. But to them I suggest taking more time to consider more closely the contexts in which he presents his arguments.

This book does not simply point the finger at “society” or “citizens”: there is plenty of critique of, and advice for, experts. Among many suggestions, Nichols offers four explicit recommendations.

- The first is that experts should strive to be more humble.
- Second, be ecumenical – and by this Nichols means experts should vary their information sources, especially where politics is concerned, and not fall into the same echo chamber that many others inhabit.
- Three, be less cynical. Here he counsels against assuming people are intentionally lying, misleading or wilfully trying to cause harm with assertions and claims that clearly go against

solid evidence.

- Finally, he cautions us all to be more discriminating – to check sources scrupulously for veracity and for political motivations.

In essence, this last point admonishes experts to mindfully counteract the potent lure of confirmation bias that plagues us all.

It would be very easy for critics to cherry-pick elements of this book and present them out of context, to see Nichols as motivated by a desire to feather his own nest and reinforce his professional standing: in short, to accuse him of being an elitist. Sadly, this would be a prime example of exactly what he is decrying.

To these people, I say: read the whole book first. If it makes you uncomfortable, or even angry, consider why.

Have a conversation about it and formulate a coherent argument to refute the positions with which you disagree. Try to resist the urge to dismiss it out of hand or attack the author himself.

I fear, though, that as is common with a treatise like this, the people who might most benefit are the least likely to read it. And if they do, they will take umbrage at the minutiae, and then dismiss or attack it.

Unfortunately we haven't worked how to change that. But to those so inclined, reading this book should have you nodding along, comforted at least that you are not alone in your concern that the role of expertise is in peril.



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