

Book Review

Tom Nichols

The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters
New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017

Reviewed by Donald R. Officer

With the publication of *The Death of Expertise*, Professor Tom Nichols of the United States War College, analyst, blogger and think tank regular has taken an idea credible in many circles and built a book of respectable length. Nichols admits it began in spontaneous anger, yet it is surely an idea which has vexed the minds of many readers from time to time and I suspect, become a periodic preoccupation with many who might be called experts in today's world. The experts, and Tom Nichols could definitely be called one, have reason to be concerned.

I began reading *The Death of Expertise* sympathetically. Who welcomes the drumbeat of disturbing assaults on the underpinnings of our culture? However, after a few pages I began to pull back as the author's arguments approached overreach not unlike the chosen targets. Nichols protests he is not attacking the right of dissent only the abuse of it. Alas, only experts can tell.

He spots the telltale symptom: many conversations in today's polarized, politicized environment are now exhausting. Agreed.

Next Nichols visits the domains where expertise morbidity is most obvious. Of course, he speaks from an American perspective, which he knows best. However, this trend respects few borders, though many wish it did. The fanciful times when everyone shared common ground, a sense of optimism about process, outcomes or a basic commitment to civility, probably never existed. Still, today in any forum where participants believe they can talk freely, more of them seem compelled to express disagreement. Agreed.

Nichols is a consultant, policy commentator and think tank regular as well as an academic who knows the higher education turf very well. He worries about how degrees are now essentially merchandised. Campuses resembling country clubs, unjustifiable grade inflation, loosening standards regarding what constitutes a presentable assignment or, indeed, a viable field of study are all on embarrassing display. Moreover, the scholarly atmosphere is further polluted by exaggerated attention to absurdly meticulous political correctness. A conservative, he also believes the attacks on expertise are mounted by believers of all ideological persuasions. Agreed.

What is less visible to the more well-heeled experts without college-age children or who draw on perks and privileges to showcase precious offspring with carefully groomed high-value giftedness is the fearful undercurrent of student debt, classism, bias and precarious employment that plagues more typical graduates. Nichols is aware of this problematic downside, but appears to see it as a secondary matter. In one sense he is correct, the overall big picture problem is the adulteration of knowledge authority in academia, research labs, newsrooms and policy shops.

But, like many wicked, highly complex problems, it will never be addressable if all aspects are not considered without prejudice.

Before you write them off, please note that not all millennials are equally self-absorbed or immersed in unshakeable self-entitlement. In a review in the December 4, 2017 *New Yorker*, by (millennial) staff writer, Jia Tolentino we read, "...when humans learn to think of themselves as assets competing in an unpredictable and punishing market, then millennials—in all their anxious, twitchy, phone-addicted glory—are exactly what you should expect." Her piece is sympathetic to all sides of the conundrum, her résumé is proof positive of true grit, and her writing of some hard-earned expertise to boot.

Neither Tolentino, nor fellow millennial Malcolm Harris, the author she profiles, are pleased with this outcome; we'd be wiser not to scapegoat a generation so hedged in by unavoidable circumstances. Nichols certainly practices selective diversity in his choice of targets, although most are the usual suspects. Consider the broader consequences of the *new* "new journalism" where attention grabber beats fact checker—anxiety being the only consistent product.

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German sociologist Nikolas Luhmann (1966) describes in extensive detail throughout *The Reality of the Mass Media*, how there arises an inevitable tension between the representation of the world (society) versus the lived experience of it (environment). Media attempt to bridge the divide, but always at the cost of truncation and over simplification. And there are complicating factors provided by the inevitable selections made by editors, nasty infiltrative dissonances and the apparent "neverendingness" of the most disturbing narratives. Add to this brew deliberate obfuscation (*real* fake news), self-serving demagoguery, aggressive commercialism or other strains of highly distracting red herrings, and you behold a noxious mix few of any generation are ready to cope with. Yet, we come to crave that addictive daily shot in the arm, the next hit of stressful news that confirms our learned helplessness.

Part of the predatory side of journalism is the similarly insatiable appetite of all media operatives, legitimate or biased, to attack every remotely suspicious aspect of every story. We know that professional newsrooms justify this compulsion as commitment to truth although we know it is obviously also done for self-protection. However, observers as sophisticated as Luhmann or as maliciously intuitive as the "alt-right" can detect in the shape of coverage a concerted, continuous effort to defend the lofty if ever-threatened ramparts of media outlets. Like Tolentino's millennials, reporters and editors dwell on anxiety's precarious knife edge.

The academy and government are no different. Half a day on google gleefully put in by an ambitious, self-aggrandizing sophomore may topple a career's worth of work and study in a lecture theatre debate. Every minister prays the briefing book will sufficiently deflect the barbs of the opposition. Nichols understandably finds this kind of outcome egregious when it looks like it undermines foundational expertise. Occasionally, off-hand observations or quips do real, that is to say *justified*, damage to fragile reputations or weak research. With Internet support anyone can look very well informed. You can be as certain as Tom Nichols is that the scholar's armour of diligence and confidence has never been so vulnerable. In the world of ideas, it's often

hard to distinguish between shallow knowledge about things and deep knowledge of them. Concession as educational politics when curriculum faces criticism may be popular with some factions, but it simultaneously leaves professors and teachers defenseless against others. Agreed.

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Governments are even more exposed. Popularity is ephemeral, while the political environment is full of landmines, unexploded unknowns a short way down the road. What's more, the best weapons politicians or bureaucrats have are the most disgraceful. Worse, publics eventually see through them. Outright lies, exaggerations, distractions and the multiple forms of gaslighting are standard equipment in the kits of official agents trapped by a promise or the misreading of a situation. The unavoidable transparency of our public sphere reveals several unappealing aspects which tempt functionaries to fabricate whatever cover they can. One convenient choice for the beleaguered official is the cloak of an overrated level of expertise.

Ultimately, while, it is entirely possible to make the claims and utter the complaints that Tom Nichols does with clarity, concision and sincerity, his case is not flawless. The threat to established knowledge is not entirely due to a rising tide of ignorance. The bigger force is new knowledge. Yes, it is true that our upstart sophomore's newfound Internet smarts do not run very deep, nor do they reflect serious deliberation. However, the verifiable part of what the student learned could be quite legitimately disruptive—call it progress. Nichols believes cherry picking gaffes and failures of hard working experts is unfair. Perhaps, but what serves the greater good?

A big important part of what we are today is less deferential to those faces of authority that neither justify nor explain their claims. Our emerging understanding is both more democratic and ultimately more civilized. Finally, let's neither underestimate nor overestimate any particular brand of expertise. The operating room performs miracles because of expert surgeons, but also anesthesiologists, scrub nurses and other specialists essential to successful patient outcomes. Yet all of them exhibit inherent limits to their individual expertise and most of them could not switch places.

Much the same observation could be made about huge numbers of offices, laboratories, factories and all the places people gather to do difficult, complex, specialized things together. When these groups do not appreciate or understand much about what the particular competencies of their colleagues are, they run into difficulties—some very serious. Gillian Tett who trained as an anthropologist before becoming a financial reporter, saw enough of these effects to appreciate how a pooling of ignorance about what others do enabled the meltdown of 2008.

Afterwards, Tett wrote *The Silo Effect* (2015) which found disturbing examples in many sectors including various levels of government that stand as a sobering explanation of why we should neither praise nor belittle expertise. When experts exaggerate their own importance and especially when they explain to the lowly uncredentialed why they, the anointed alone, must be attended to, gaining willing support is a hard sell. If we set ourselves up this way we are building a house of cards. Tom Nichol is right to be worried about the symptoms, but his particular brand of thinking may be contributing to the problem as well.

One more observation about the fate of expertise is the accelerating element of game changing. The disruption we despise, seek or provoke is on its way regardless. We should be humble in that knowledge. Like the long-gone workers who once made buggy whips, in the near future we will find almost all our expertise has become obsolete.

About the Author:

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