

BOOK REVIEWS

The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters

Tom Nichols. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

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I recently saw a satirical video advertising doctors as the solution to confusion surrounding the coronavirus pandemic. The video made the point that doctors, people who have dedicated close to a decade of education to understanding disease processes, have been some of the most ignored voices in the Covid-19 crisis. Tom Nichols, Professor of National Security Affairs at the Naval War College, would argue that this assessment is true not only of medicine, but also of expert fields in general. Nichols, in this book diagnoses the death of expertise as a disregard for experts by the lay public. Nichols argues that the American lay person no longer considers the expert's opinion to have extraordinary weight, and the expert subsequently withdraws from conversations where their knowledge is not valued (Nichols 2017, 4–5).

Nichols acknowledges that people have always remained skeptical of experts but writes that this new death of expertise highlights an active hostility to expert knowledge and a concurrent embracing of misinformation (Nichols 2017, 20). He argues that this “rejection of science and dispassionate rationality” spells doom for modern democracy (Nichols 2017, 5). Nichols describes the primary characteristics of this phenomenon as the illusion of intellectual egalitarianism and the commodification of higher education and journalism, both of which are accelerated by the inundation of information from the Internet.

One of Nichols's strongest points regards the devolution of higher education. Nichols lambasts the American higher education system, arguing that mass college attendance, the proliferation of professorships and colleges marketed as universities, and the ubiquity of bachelor's degrees has bankrupted the value of undergraduate education (Nichols 2017, 72–76). The pervasiveness of an undergraduate education devalues college and, to his argument for the death of expertise, gives people an illusion of expertise or credibility. An example he gives from the medical field is the finding that low childhood vaccine compliance in a population generally correlates with educated parents rather than parents with less schooling (Nichols 2017, 21). Although counterintuitive, Nichols argues that these individuals' education leads to an unwarranted confidence in rejecting expert knowledge.

Nichols superbly highlights the psychological basis for the death of expertise. He explains how psychological defense mechanisms incline people against expert opinions that contradict their deeply held values (Nichols 2017, Ch.2). The connection of these mechanisms to the swaths of information on the Internet arms any skeptic with a response to expert claims (Nichols 2017, Ch.4). Nichols's ultimate impact is stated gravely in the conclusion. For the sake of democracy, people must purposefully inform themselves. A Google search will not suffice this time. Democratic governments require experts to help shape sound policy, and experts must be valued for the sake of the nation (Nichols 2017, 230–31). With this impact, Nichols expands the scope of the death of expertise from individual cases to whole societies. For the medical professional, mistrust in experts means more than serving as the second opinion to Dr. Google. This mistrust can jeopardize effective responses to public health crises when both policy responses and the general populace choose to forgo expert advice, risking lives and livelihoods.

Although Nichols's book is well-crafted in its narrative of the death of expertise, there remain a few areas where his argument could have been strengthened. First, Nichols primarily relies on anecdotes rather than thorough empirical evidence. This would make sense were Nichols to describe his own experience, but the lack of statistical evidence makes it difficult to prove a systematic problem regarding hostility towards experts. Furthermore, Nichols hints in his chapters on journalism and higher education that commodification has ruined the integrity of these institutions. These bigger concepts—commodification and a populist distrust in elites—seem to comprise the foundation of Nichols's argument, but without an in-depth analysis of the systemic problem, his ability to analyze these social shifts is limited.

Second, Nichols does not address situations in which experts disagree. In transiently mentioning this issue, Nichols quotes Bertrand Russell as saying, “when [experts] are not agreed, no opinion can be regarded as certain by a non-expert.” (Nichols 2017, 207) However, there are times when decisions must be made, even if there is expert disagreement. Deeper than mere disagreement, Nichols also leaves unaddressed the issue of ideological polarization, when expert disagreement stems not from good faith differences of interpretation but from differences in ideological agenda. While not deadly to Nichols's argument, these conflicts must be clarified if his advice can be practiced.

Finally, Nichols seems to frame society as comprised of the experts and the lay people without providing for a middle ground. A middle ground of the “lay expert” is implied—he states that there is no excuse for people to be uninformed about a relevant issue—yet uncertainty remains as to the significance of the lay expert in relation to the expert (Nichols 2017, 206–7). Nichols crafts a tension between listening to the experts and seeking to inform oneself. Nichols may be simply arguing that people should better understand the limits of their knowledge. However, being informed is only useful if it aligns with the expert's view, in which case it seems easier to just allow the expert their field without bothering to understand it. Again, this argument does not deny the death of expertise, but it creates ambiguity in applying Nichols's ideas.

A comprehensive Christian response to such societal rifts does not come easily. However, important elements of a Christian response to the death of expertise should involve being critically informed while remaining humbly mindful of one's biases and knowledge limitations. A humble evaluation of perspectives may reveal that people's passionate stances often rest on underlying values that they want to protect, rather than an actual disagreement with the action. In the current Covid-19 pandemic, for example, those who choose not to wear masks may be concerned with infringements on personal freedoms rather than convinced that masks are inefficacious. Evaluating what values are godly and worthy of defense can help to remove unnecessary barriers to civil communication with experts and those with whom we disagree. Understanding that the church recognizes an internal hierarchy of authority, prideful ignorance toward authority is no more foolish in the secular sphere than in the church (cf. Hebrew 13:7, 17).

The Death of Expertise offers a compelling yet incomplete picture of the fragmentation between experts and the lay public in society. Social shifts towards populism and commodification, combined with the Internet's information monopoly, have sown distrust of expert knowledge. Published as the 45th U.S. president was beginning his term, Nichols's predictions and warnings appear almost prophetic, no less so than in the current Covid-19 crisis. With Covid-19, the medical community has seen public health politicized and experts ignored. While not easily bridged, the gap between experts and the public can begin to narrow if the populace chooses to inform itself and critically seek the truth amid the overwhelming untruths. Experts must likewise seek to understand and connect with the public despite the radical polarization that often induces divisive tribalism. Such a task is not easy, but it is vital to the healthy functioning of society.

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