

The death of expertise: recovering humanitarianism, discovering bias, and valuing true knowledge.

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Author Tim Nichols, in his book.¹“*The Death of Expertise: the Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters*”, laments the increasing public distrust of experts. He is both defending the existence and importance of genuine specialized expertise in a complex world as well as lamenting a social problem that stems from information overload,² decreased interest in things that matter,³ and individual inability to do mental labor.⁴ These thorny social problems have spawned entire genres of popular and scientific literature and they have implications for science communication.

The problem itself is everywhere evident. As of 2017, the publication date of this book, most individuals in most developed nations have access to the internet. The volume of ‘information’ available on the internet exacerbates the feeling that access to information equals wisdom. Nichols chronicles the disastrous democratization of knowledge that ends up in a severe inability to discern the quality of knowledge sources. This leveling effect of the internet is at once liberating and crippling—crippling in that truly authoritative, high-value knowledge is treated on par with emerging and amateur (untested) knowledge. The successful blogger who has owned eight chickens for a year may have greater reach in promoting ideas about how to care for chickens than the poultry scientist who has been rigorously investigating and synthesizing deep knowledge about chicken health and care for decades. In our rush to either demonize elitist science or denigrate backyard self-proclaimed experts, we risk rejecting one or the other when both are needed. The scientist ought listen to the observations of (longer-term) chicken farmers, whose experiential knowledge may be great with particularly careful observation. The job of the poultry (or rangeland) expert is to receive, accept, and respond to valuable observations with efforts to tease out causality. This respects the real, contextual knowledge of practitioners and advances our understanding of a body of science.

Another author, Faith Kearns, herself a study-er of rangelands once upon a time, advocates for this careful listening and richer interaction between scientists and non-scientists in her book “*Getting to the Heart of Science Communication*.”⁵ We in the science community (maybe this us-them dichotomy is too strong) must be willing to identify our own biases and prejudices to enhance the scientific enterprise and simultaneously offer other individuals the respect we would wish for ourselves. Identifying one’s internal biases, driven by local culture, religion, ethnic tradition, etc., is an established tenet of qualitative science; bias is unavoidable, so the only responsible thing is to attempt to identify and at least admit it. And qualitative scientists are critical of so-called ‘hard’ scientists because they smugly claim to be objective in their quantitative analysis of the observed world. However, the interpretations of data points are inescapably driven by the biases we think we can ignore.

Nichols argues that we increasingly cherish these differences and use them to justify further segregation. Confirmation bias causes us to seek out (readily available) information sources which confirm the opinion we already hold. We love our biases and want others to reinforce them. This has unfortunate negative consequences for civil society, especially for a democratic republic. It also hinders science communication, which Kearns argues convincingly must not be seen and pursued as unidirectional information delivery. Philosophers have said for millennia that freedom is the greatest enemy of freedom. Freedom, which supports individual initiative through enjoying the fruits of one’s labor, generates wealth and peace. Wealth and peace create easy living which undermines public virtue. This can be seen at multiple spatial scales, from the individual to the nation, and often in cycles. We are at a low point in that cycle, culturally, with widespread distrust of experts and politicians and other individuals (and the separating of these two is technical, not cynical or political). We “argue rather than discuss, insult rather than listen” (Nichols, p. 9). Every piece of information, scientific or otherwise, is perceived as promoting a political agenda and tribal commitments rather than open-minded reasoning governing our consideration of seemingly innocuous pieces of data.

But it is worthwhile to separate specialized expertise from cultural decision-making. Nichols’ cautions scientists, who are otherwise cheering him on through his defense of expertise, that each scientific discipline thinks it has the ‘right’ conclusions at the point where that particular science intersects society and human decision-making. But the world is more complex than that. The expert in climate science or foreign relations with Afghanistan or public land use economics is critically important to informing public policy.



The policymaker has to balance more than just the singular view of a subject matter expert. She has to consider how a decision about federal land use policy affects local economies, international trade, endangered species protections, water quality, etc. This synthesis and weighing are challenging and necessary, and it cannot be decided by democratic means. It requires its own kind of expertise, which is why we still have a republic rather than a strict democracy. It may, in fact, require people who have broad knowledge rather than narrow and deep knowledge.

One of most influential geographers of the 1900s, Carl Sauer, was said by a colleague to “take all knowledge as his province.”⁶ Decisions affecting numerous scientific domains are best made by one who has some competency across all domains. Indeed, in a book coincidentally titled “Range”, David Epstein shows why “generalists triumph in a specialized world.”⁷ We certainly see this in natural resources management, and rangeland folks do this relatively well. A plant ecologist understands competitive relations among shrubs and grasses in a semi-arid environment. The fire scientist has some mature ideas about how successional trajectories are affected by fire in its variations of timing, intensity, and frequency. The wildlife biologist can predict, with some degree of accuracy, how sage grouse populations will respond to individual environmental changes: forb diversity and abundance or shrub loss from wildfire. But assembling all of these spheres of knowledge into decisions about land use requires understanding all of these knowledge domains enough to weigh them and combine them into wise application. Let those of us who are experts inform and advocate with humility toward our own limitations and patience with those who cannot possibly know all they need to know to make sound political decisions at a broader scale which affects much more than just my expert interests. It is truly more important to be able to think well than to have much memorized trivial information. The skill of the generalist, which we specialists should aspire to, involves, in part, being able to distinguish among competing sources of specialized knowledge, to weigh the relative authority of a given source and incorporate it accordingly. And in the process, we absolutely must acknowledge and respond to our own prejudices in order to get to the heart of individuals and communicate scientific knowledge with care for fellow humans to “pass on a good earth”.⁶

References

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