



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

Author _ Tom Nichols

Publisher _ Oxford University Press, 2017. 272p. Hardcover \$24.95.

ISBN: 978-0-1904-6941-2. E-book available

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When hearing the phrase “The Death of Expertise,” one must consider what type of book they are reading a review about. In this case, we must also look to the subtitle to begin to gain an understanding into Tom Nichols’ current work. His newest book, which details attacks from all sides on established knowledge from experts, professionals, and the entities who take this expertise and use it on a day to day basis, is prescient in the fact that he describes the exact conditions happening in America today. Using only six chapters, Mr. Nichols pulls from his own area of expertise (the Soviet/Russian government and its military) and existing examples that have happened since the beginning of the 20th century (from the Industrial Revolution to the internet) to detail the dearth and lack of education of most of the American people when it comes to what, who, and why the experts are what they are and what they do to help us.

Nichols describes, in intimate detail and blunt phrasing, exactly where the fault lies with our current “*death of expertise*”: you, me, your families, your friends, your doctors, even your government. We are asking experts to take on the monumental task of predicting the future. Nichols details how this lack of understanding by average citizens (who, he rightfully points out, are less civically literate and more inclined to want results now, that are in line with their own views and beliefs, than the last couple of generations), and the fact that we are awash in more information than we can ever hope to process, is also a main contributing factor to the reason why we distrust, dislike, and overall do not like to rely on experts/professionals for any information, let alone the correct information needed to make the decisions that rule our lives (be it simple ones or life/death issues; he expands on this more in the entire book).

Nichols also tries his hardest to make sure that we understand that our own inherent confirmation bias, our tendencies to be in our own information bubble (not reaching out and reading information that does not concur with our own thoughts and beliefs), the internet, and the mass glut of information available to us has also had a lasting (and unknown) impact on America’s public discourse with each other and others. The author uses many examples from his

own life (his incorrect position that the USSR would not fall) to well-known cases where experts have caused real, physical harm (Andrew Wakefield and Linus Pauling) to rightfully point out that even the experts are sometimes wrong and this happens to all of us; we are human beings and make mistakes. Combine this with the fact that the last few generations have shown to be less educated about civics—politics being the cornerstone of Nichols’ argument for why expertise is dying—one must wonder what will happen if expertise is truly dead.

The author dedicates the entire third chapter to his own realm: the academy. He is quick to point out that not many in the world of academe are willing or able to point out that even though college is where we learn valuable critical thinking skills and learn fields of study and the knowledge needed to be contributing members of society, colleges have become like businesses: owning and selling trademarks, huge athletic industries, and embracing the one main tenet of the customer service industry; “the customer is always right.” As Nichols points out, this is hurting the very places that are dedicated to advanced learning and is where we most of our experts have historically come from (distinguishing these experts from laypersons that have what we have known as “common knowledge/sense experts”).

Throughout the entire book, Nichols calmly points out—and dedicates the last chapter to—the fact that even the experts are wrong. This is an important part of his entire thesis and argument into why we are traveling down a dangerous path, when the common person no longer listens to those people upon whom history, religion, and society has bestowed the power to be experts in their fields in the first place. Of course, bringing the information up to the current times, with his examples and complete Chapter 4 dedicated to “*letting me Google that for you*,” Nichols also reminds us in clever and accurate ways that there is no going back, and we must learn that the current path of misinformation, fake media, even the internet itself, is the one most dominating and useful resource that humanity has ever known. It has expanded and benefitted the lives of billions of people around the world, but when everyone can be “an expert” solely based on what they



Google, Nichols states that they have no underlying understanding of what they are reading/learning to combat their non-knowledge of what they are talking about (the Dunning-Kruger Effect, Chapter 2); this means that the less they know, the more they think they know.

All of this has led to what Nichols has stated throughout the book: a lack of knowledge and competence, and apathy

in more people than ever before about our society and its inner workings, has led to an “I don’t care, I can’t change anything” attitude that is slowly eroding our personal, political, and economic norms. While Nichols can’t predict what will happen next, he is hopeful that something good will survive, and in his own words, in closing, “*That, at least, is my expert opinion on the matter. I could be wrong.*”