



In Experts We Trust?

As access to information burgeons, experts are more crucial than ever

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“WHY DID NOBODY NOTICE IT?” Queen Elizabeth II famously asked the faculty at the London School of Economics in November 2008, just after the financial crisis erupted.

Almost a decade later, people are asking experts the same question following the unforeseen events of 2016—including the UK vote to leave the European Union and Donald Trump’s election as president of the United States. Confidence in economists, pollsters, and experts in general has been shaken.

Not only are experts seen as having gotten it wrong, their monopoly on opinion has been

weakened by technology. Social media and the Internet make information widely available without experts’ input, news is targeted to individual interests and preferences, and people increasingly choose whom to follow and trust.

What have they done for us?

Recall Monty Python’s *Life of Brian*, in which a group called the People’s Front of Judea organizes a rebellion against the Roman Empire. The rebels work themselves into a frenzy culminating in a shout from their leader, Reg: “What have they [the Romans] ever given us?” After a pause, one of the rank and file gingerly points out that the local aqueduct has been useful. Then others one by one mention additional helpful Roman innovations until finally Reg must restate his question: “Apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, the fresh water system, and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?!”

We all need experts. They have helped tackle disease, reduce poverty, and improve human welfare. People live about 20 years longer than they did in 1950 thanks to cleaner water and better sanitation and health care. Average world incomes are more than 20 times higher thanks to better economic policies, particularly in developing economies. To build on this progress, we need reliable experts who command public confidence.

But experts today don’t have their old monopoly on authority. Technology gives people access to more information, changes how they get it, and affects how they form opinions. According to a report by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University, half of people with access to the Internet get their news from social media—double the number since 2013 in the United States.

The digitization of knowledge and its ready availability have been hugely democratizing and empowering. People can go to the doctor armed with information about their illnesses and alternative treatments. The wisdom of crowds can generate restaurant reviews, rate products and services, and offer new thinking on a range of issues. “Likes” and “dislikes” and reviews of thousands of individuals can build trust.

But there are downsides: information that is difficult to verify can be overwhelming; algorithms create echo chambers of like-minded people who

never see another side; fake news distorts reality; anonymity gives power to those who may abuse it; and a world of more revenue for more clicks rewards the shrillest voice and promotes extreme views.

Experts, who sift through information and make informed judgments, are just one more voice amid the cacophony, and their inaccessible language often renders them the least heard. Experts distinguish themselves from nonexperts through credentials, use of jargon, control over academic journals, and influence over training of new experts. These boundaries can reduce their effectiveness, especially given the many alternative sources of information. A recent blog post by Bank of England staff members analyzed the linguistic complexity of the bank's publications and found that only one in five people could understand them.

The changing landscape of trust undermines experts as well. The Edelman Trust Barometer for 2017 finds that in two-thirds of countries, fewer than 50 percent of people trust mainstream business, government, media, and nongovernmental organizations to do the right thing. People now put their trust elsewhere. "Someone like me" is just as credible as an academic or technical expert, and far more credible than a CEO or government official—a shift in trust toward family and friends glaringly evident on social media.

Rebuilding trustworthiness

Oxford philosopher Onora O'Neill argues that societies can raise trustworthiness in two ways: through standard-setting legislation, regulation, or guidance—often accompanied by requirements to confirm compliance—or through information that allows people to assess trustworthiness for themselves. But how can we restore experts' trustworthiness?

Brevity, not bravado: Bertrand Russell once said, "The whole problem of the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, but wiser people so full of doubts." Experts wonder not only whether their models are calibrated correctly, but whether they are even using the right models. Honesty about such uncertainty will over the long term build experts' credibility. A good example of this is the use of fan charts in forecasts produced by the Bank of England, and increasingly by other central banks as well: they show

the wide range of possible outcomes for a given set of initial circumstances rather than predicting a single result. But conveying uncertainty makes a message more complex and doesn't go over well in a world that demands brevity. For example, it's a lot easier—and more effective—to tweet "Bank of England forecasts growth of 2%" than "If economic circumstances identical to today were to prevail on 100 occasions, the best collective judgment of the Monetary Policy Committee is that the mature estimate of GDP growth would lie above 2 percent on 50 occasions and below 2 percent on 50 occasions," even though that would more accurately describe the fan charts' true meaning.

In short, the challenge for experts today is how to communicate with brevity but not bravado.

Best practice in the media: High standards and good practice are important given the vital role the media play in mediating the views of experts in a democracy. While these standards and practices do exist in most of the traditional print and broadcast media, the Internet has changed the economics of the industry, giving rise to a new breed of bloggers and pseudo-journalists who sometimes don't abide by standards of fairness, accuracy, and transparency. Furthermore, the growing role of social media in the dissemination of news makes it increasingly difficult for consumers to distinguish between legitimate journalism and the fake variety. All this could be why the mainstream media have lost the trust of people in more than 80 percent of countries, according to the 2016 Edelman Trust Barometer.

The rise of fake news and so-called false equivalence—which, in the name of balanced reporting, gives equal time to credible and less credible sources—has only made matters worse. How can producers of information and expertise balance reliability with the need to present opposing views?

The standards and principles widely used in academia could be adapted and applied more broadly to the world of think tanks, websites, and the media. Well-established principles such as peer review, competition for research funding, the obligation to publish data, and transparency about conflicts of interest in publications govern what is valued as an intellectual contribution.

For example, should think tanks openly report their funding sources? Should journalists and

bloggers be exposed if they report or recirculate falsehoods or rumors? Should digital platforms take greater responsibility for their content as part of their duty to inform and protect their own brand?

Public tools to assess trustworthiness: Citizens must be able to distinguish fact from falsehood in the flood of information they receive. Online commerce has developed many tools that do just that: ratings by other consumers, feedback on other raters' reliability, and performance measures such as timeliness of delivery.

What about the world of ideas? In some areas, traditional institutions have evolved to meet this need. Authoritative medical websites provide reliable information to discerning patients who would otherwise have to sift through information from multiple sources. Fact-checking websites that

of elected officials. Problems can arise when experts try to be politicians and when politicians try to be experts. Clarity about these roles and accountability that reinforces them are essential. If experts cross that line, they undermine the credibility of their expertise and their professional accountability. Politicians who cross that line risk misleading the public that elected them to look out for their interests.

Independent institutions such as the civil service, central banks, and universities have a special role in mediating expertise in the public interest, but technocracy must derive its authority from democracy. That requires a commitment to hold experts accountable as more decisions require technical input. Some critics argue that activities such as financial audits, research quality controls, process and compliance reviews, environmental impact

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vet claims by public figures mimic peer review in academia, which lends credibility to—or challenges—news and individuals' statements. And the International Fact Checking Network's code of principles is committed to nonpartisanship, transparency about funding sources and methodology, and honest corrections.

New institutions are trying to enhance trustworthiness where it has eroded. For example, in the United Kingdom the Banking Standards Board, which focuses on conduct standards in banks, and the Fixed Income, Currencies, and Commodities Markets Standards Board, which sets the bar in wholesale financial markets, were established after the misconduct scandals during the financial crisis. Schools and universities must teach students to be discerning information consumers, and public awareness campaigns can improve the media. In a world of plentiful information, the future of education is in teaching critical thinking and judgment to prepare students to be informed citizens.

Boundary between technocracy and democracy: As decisions become ever more technical, unelected experts are increasingly entering—with huge social consequences—what was once the purview

assessments, independent evaluation offices, and parliamentary inquiries are costly, encourage risk aversion, and divert resources from important work. But that is a small price to pay for legitimating expert input for democratic decision making.

A future informed by knowledge

The application of knowledge and its accumulation through education and dissemination via the media and institutions are integral to human progress. The question is not how to manage without experts, but how to ensure that the experts are trustworthy. Humility and candor about the limits of expertise, clear communication, rigorous assessment of ideas, tools to help the public differentiate among ideas, and genuine listening to others' views are the answer.

Better management of the boundaries and accountability between experts and politicians will help maintain the balance between technocracy and democracy. If we get this right our future will be shaped by knowledge and informed debate rather than ignorance and narrowmindedness. **FD**

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