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## Tom Nichols
*The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 252

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According to Wiebe Bijker, Roland Bal and Ruud Hendriks (2009) we live in paradoxical times. Scientific advice is asked for all serious problems, but as soon as it is given, citizens, politicians and organizations comment on and criticize it. This paradox of scientific authority is at the origins of what has been called a crisis of expertise, a widespread trend which is grounded not only in socio-technical developments, such as the spread of social media, but also in cultural and political changes related to new visions of democracy and the democratization of science.

The crisis of expertise is a topic that is currently in vogue, and has been widely discussed in the field of science and technology studies and other academic communities (Collins and Evans 2007; see issue 3/2003 of "Social Studies of Science"). This area of research is also linked to a more recent, broader debate about the so-called "post-truth era" (see issue 4/2017 of "Social Studies of Science"), which highlights the development of an "epistemic turn" in Western democracies that produced a less critical relationship with deception (Keyes 2004). Under the aegis of the post-truth thesis, scholars have shown how a plurality of "truth markets" coexist within the new post-truth regime (Harsin 2015).

In this context, it is disappointing that an established scholar such as Tom Nichols does not feel the need to address the studies and opinions of his fellow experts, even in a text with pretensions to popular appeal. There is something paradoxical in describing and stigmatizing the end of expertise without drawing upon the knowledge of experts on the end of expertise. A typical failure on the part of experts that has contributed to the crisis of expertise is, according to Nichols, cross-expertise violations, that is, the overconfidence that leads experts to make pronouncements on matters far beyond their general area of competence and use their own epistemic authority to lend weight to hastily constructed opinions. This book is a blatant example of a political scientist overreaching into a field in which he lacks competence.

Nevertheless, Nichols's book, which appeared in English in 2017 and was immediately translated into Italian for LUISS University Press, attempts to describe this phenomenon by breaking it down into its many facets. Or, at least, into some of them. The book's chapters, in fact, address the main fields in which the death of expertise is taking place, according to the author.

First, he describes what he considers a crisis of the ability to argue. In his view, we are losing the ability to conduct conversations focused on the "thing itself", as Husserl would say, where one is able to separate judgments about opinions from judgments about people, to recognize that certain opinions are more grounded in knowledge and reality than others, and to change his or her mind. According to Nichols, this inability underlies well-known phenomena such as echo chambers, confirmation bias and conspiracy theories that support the dissemination of alternative knowledge and therefore the crisis of expertise.

A topic that is very close to the author's heart is the commercialization of the American university, that is, the transformation of the relationship between professors and students, which is increasingly modeled on marketing demands and customer satisfaction rather than on educational patterns. This, he claims, impels teachers to subordinate the contents of their teaching to the opinions of their audience and therefore to common sense, indirectly teaching their students that all opinions are equally valid and that those held by the majority should therefore prevail, regardless of the degree of expertise of the majority itself.

Of course, the book would not be complete without a chapter on the role of the Internet in the crisis of expertise, given that it is one of the most commonly discussed topics. Nichols's opinion, however, is that "the Internet is not the primary cause of challenges to the expertise. Rather, the Internet has accelerated the collapse of communication between experts and laypeople by offering an apparent shortcut to erudition" (p. 105). The problem with the web is that its infinite scope, combined with the use of search engines, means that anyone can easily find enough documentation to convince them still further of the truth of their deeply rooted convictions. Even the most serious crowd-sourced projects, such as Wikipedia, cannot do without the help of experts to ensure that the contributions of laypeople are trustworthy. Wikipedia is for Nichols an object lesson in the limits of the Internet-driven displacement of expertise.

A chapter addresses the issue of the decline of traditional journalism. Free information is a major pillar of a democratic society, which in order to function properly requires well-informed citizens. Nichols's thesis is that in a world in which citizens demand to be entertained instead of informed and journalists work in a hypercompetitive media environment, this essential function for democracy is becoming lost, along with the function of the media to discriminate between reliable and unreliable news and knowledge.

Finally, a chapter is dedicated to the role of experts themselves in causing the crisis of expertise through their mistakes and cheating. In addition to the aforementioned case of cross-expertise violations, Nichols deals in detail with the shift from explanations to predictions and the case of deception, such as the manipulation of data and falsification of credentials. An important aspect that the author emphasizes is that the crisis of trust in experts is not so much about their specific expertise on given issues as about their ability to apply that expertise when it comes to matters of public policy.

To summarize the main thesis of the book, for Nichols we are witnessing more than a natural skepticism towards experts. We are witnessing the growth of a stubborn form of ignorance, which is generated by "an increasingly narcissistic culture that cannot endure even the slightest hint of inequality of any kind" (p. 4). The death of expertise is the result of the spread of a form of ignorance which is so radical as to deprive those whom it afflicts of the ability to realize it, and therefore make them prey to the Dunning-Kruger Effect, according to which the dumber the individual, the more confident s/he is that s/he is not actually dumb.

Yet the fundamental point that escapes Nichols is that, on the contrary, the crisis of expertise is not a *crisis of ignorance*, but a *crisis of trust*. It is not about individual education or the qualities of "people", but rather the relationship between experts and laypeople in contemporary society. The case of vaccines is significant in this regard. As Nichols himself observes, the parents most likely to resist vaccines are not found among small-town mothers with little schooling, but among educated San Francisco suburbanites in Marin County: "While these mothers and fathers are not doctors, they are educated just enough to believe they have the background to challenge established medical science" (p. 21). The fact that they are educated people suggests that what motivates them is not the rejection of expertise and experts, but the awareness (absent in less educated people) that there are *other* experts besides those who are institutionally legitimized. That is, the awareness that experts may disagree with each other, and that consequently the institutionalized expertise of doctors and scientists is not necessarily true. The crisis of expertise is, in short, very different from the "death of expertise": it does not concern the recognition of the legitimacy of the epistemic authority of experts, but it questions *whose* epistemic authority should be recognized. The current crisis of expertise seems to be the result not so much of an aggressive rejection of epistemic authority as of greater independence of the lay public in choosing the network of experts to whom they are willing to grant such authority.

If we consider the problem from this point of view, we are encouraged to address a number of issues about scientific controversies, boundary work strategies, the construction of the ideas of science and pseudo-science, the dynamics of stabilization of knowledge claims, reputational policies of institutionalized and alternative knowledge networks, and so on. In

other words, this would open up a vast set of issues within the sociology of knowledge that the current debate on the crisis of expertise has not yet fully scrutinized. However, Nichols fails to deal with such issues, not only because of his approach as described above, but also because the scientific interest that drives his research focuses on the political dimension of the problem. This becomes clear in the book's conclusions. When trust between experts and citizens collapses, Nichols writes, "experts and laypeople become warring factions. And when that happens, democracy itself can enter a death spiral that presents an immediate danger of decay either into rule by the mob or toward elitist technocracy" (p. 216). The death of expertise interests him as a dysfunction of democracy itself, not as a moment of transformation of knowledge production processes. Therefore, the reformulation of the title in the Italian edition seems appropriate.

Nichols has produced a rather US-centric journalistic pamphlet, which is easy to read but rather meagre in terms of content and depth and which is ultimately yet another of the many outpourings of old-fashioned university professors as they rail against the decay of their own institution, their own prestige, and the quality of their students. The nostalgia for an elite university institution, a form of university that exists only in the memories of the older generations, recalls ways of approaching modernity *à la* Ortega y Gasset, and makes Nichols appear to be a fundamentally conservative observer. He blames stereotypes, but the protagonists of his narrative are themselves highly stereotyped figures, such as "citizens", "experts", "students", "journalists" and, above all, "people". Society is flattened into categories, which do not do justice to actual social subjects. Who are the experts? It makes a big difference if we are thinking of scientists (experts in the production of knowledge) or of professional groups such as lawyers (experts in the use of expert knowledge). Even within the limited sphere of those who produce new knowledge, the crisis of expertise acquires different meanings – and will produce different effects – if the experts who are affected by the crisis are researchers in institutionalized fields of western science, developers of innovative, cutting edge areas of research, disseminators, consultants to policy makers, or experts in alternative knowledge (pseudoscience). To flatten the complexity of such a complex landscape is to do the reader a disservice, even the generic "educated reader" at whom this volume is probably aimed.

Mark Twain is reported to have once affirmed in a letter to the *New York Journal*, commenting on rumors that he was gravely ill or even dead: "The reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated". As observed by Gil Eyal in his *The Crisis of Expertise* (2019), this applies to the death of expertise as well. After all, he notes (Eyal 2019, 3), "whenever a book is published with the title 'The death of … (common sense, books, money, white privilege, or what have you),' it's a fair bet that Twain's quip holds, the reports are greatly exaggerated, and the subject of the lament is gratefully invigorated by the renewed interest in its health".

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### N. Oudshoorn
*Resilient Cyborgs. Living and Dying with Pacemakers and Defibrillators,* London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 350

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Providing an autonomous review of a medical book during a moment in history when the ubiquitous COVID-19 pandemic progressively has reshaped the imagined future of health and illness has been a challenging task. Other diseases look anachronistic. Nelly Oudshoorn's book *Resilient Cyborg* is a strong call to the "COVID-aside reality", telling us how some people are living and dying with pacemakers and defibrillators, which are intrusive technologies surgically implanted in patients' bodies. Pacemakers and defibrillators have changed radically over the past few decades (the first prototype for a pacemaker was introduced in 1985), considering that at the beginning, they were used only for patients who had survived cardiac arrest. Nowadays, these medical devices transform subjects into "mundane cyborgs".

The book's core argument is that people living with defibrillators and pacemakers are far from being passive entities. With a strong empirical focus, the volume takes the reader on a journey inside and outside what the author calls "everyday cyborg bodies" (p. 17).

Oudshoorn's book is structured around four main parts ("Introduction: theorising the resilience of hybrid bodies"; "Technogeographies of resilience"; "Resilience and difference"; and "How hybrid bodies fall apart").

The first part (Chapters 1-2) theorises on the resilience of hybrid bodies, a concept that has inspired many STS scholars (but not exclusively) to