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The Refinement of Expertise: A Digital Age Perspective

We live in a paradoxical era. On one hand, we have access to an abundance of information, but on the other hand, the quality of that information is often questionable. In chapter 4, titled 'Let Me Google That for You: How Unlimited Information is Making Us Dumber,' of his book "*The Death of Expertise*," Tom Nichols argues that this proliferation of self-proclaimed experts erodes civil discourse and undermines democratic institutions. While Nichols' argument is compelling and raises valid concerns, it overlooks the complexities and opportunities our information-rich society presents. This essay will *explore* those complexities, arguing that while the internet has indeed contributed to the devaluation of expert opinions in some respects, it also offers avenues for intellectual growth, innovation, and the democratization of knowledge. Furthermore, it will question Nichols' apparent skepticism towards intellectual diversity, suggesting that a multiplicity of perspectives is essential for societal progress.

Tom Nichols' critique largely centers on the internet, which he views as a primary conduit for disseminating ignorance disguised as expertise. Nichols contends that the internet has become a playground for those who disseminate misinformation, cherry-pick data, and argue without a foundation. Though this is an undoubtedly bleak aspect of our online world, to focus solely on this facet would be to disregard the transformative power that the internet has had on human knowledge and collective problem-solving.

A recent study titled "*Disinformation: A Bibliometric Review*" From the "*International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*" underscores the significance of the issue, stating that "disinformation has become a crucial public health issue" (Wang). The study further elaborates on the impact of misinformation on politics, public health, and social cohesion, underscoring the gravity of the issue Nichols raises. However, the paper also touches on the complexity of the problem, which cannot be attributed solely to the internet but instead reflects deeper societal issues.

However, where Nichols sees a wasteland of misinformation, others see a landscape of unprecedented potential for collective intelligence and the democratization of knowledge. The internet has *revolutionized* collaboration, enabling rapid progress in various fields. Networks of scientists, researchers, and ordinary people can come together to solve problems, share knowledge, and challenge established ways of thinking. Undoubtedly, the internet has *significantly democratized* access to information and revolutionized the means of producing it.

Henry Jenkins, in his report "*Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*" argues that the digital age has enabled a form of "participatory culture" where individuals are not just consumers of information but also contributors (Jenkins), which is vastly different from the passive consumption of knowledge that Nichols seems to lament. Jenkins suggests that our challenge is not merely to sift through misinformation but to empower individuals to engage critically and productively with the information available. "The new literacies almost all involve social skills developed through collaboration and networking," Jenkins states, emphasizing that these skills are vital in navigating the digital landscape.

Furthermore, the internet has had a leveling effect with positive and negative ramifications. On the one hand, it has enabled voices previously marginalized or excluded from

public discourse to have a platform. On the other hand, it has allowed for the spread of misinformation, as Nichols argues. The question then becomes, how do we leverage the positive aspects of this leveling effect while mitigating the negatives? Nichols suggests a return to respect for traditional expertise, but this fails to capture the full range of solutions available.

The crux of the issue might not necessarily be the internet itself but how it interacts with human cognitive biases. A study on "*Misinformation and Its Correction*" from Psychological Science in the Public Interest notes that misinformation is not easy to correct, and this is due to fundamental aspects of human cognition (Lewandowsky et al.). In this light, blaming the internet for the "death of expertise" may be akin to blaming the messenger for the message. The internet is a tool; like any tool, its impact is shaped by the hands that wield it.

In his argument, Nichols asserts that society must revive its respect for expertise - a notion that finds widespread acceptance. However, Nichols' argument presents a paradox he must address adequately. He criticizes society for relying on non-experts for information, but he overlooks the transformative nature of the internet in bridging gaps in knowledge and understanding. As Lewandowsky et al. mention in their study "*Misinformation and Its Correction*," the internet is a tool, and like any tool, its impact is shaped by the hands that wield it. Therefore, it is not merely the presence of the internet that is causing the demise of expertise, but rather how individuals use or misuse this powerful tool.

According to Henry Jenkins, the digital age has enabled a participatory culture that leads to a more knowledgeable society. However, people need to be educated on how to examine information critically. Jenkins believes that educational systems should teach people how to navigate this participatory culture actively rather than consume information passively. In a world overloaded with information, it is crucial to differentiate between credible information and fake

news. Instead of blaming the public for their lack of information, we should focus on empowering them with the necessary tools to think critically. Nichols' view that people are just passive information consumers is *overly simplistic* and ignores the complexity of human cognition and learning.

The issue of disinformation campaigns has grown increasingly complex and sophisticated, as revealed by a bibliometric review study titled "Disinformation" conducted by Wang et al. The study highlights the fact that even individuals who are digitally literate can be influenced by disinformation campaigns. Thus, adopting multi-disciplinary approaches to tackle this problem is crucial, as relying solely on traditional forms of expertise may prove insufficient.

In his proposal to combat disinformation, Nichols suggests relying on traditional expertise. However, this approach is too simplistic and does not consider the multi-layered nature of the problem. Disinformation is prevalent today, and it can be challenging to distinguish accurate information from false information. To address this issue, we need to recognize the intricate landscape of information and disinformation that we encounter daily.

To develop effective strategies for combating disinformation, we must take a comprehensive approach that may involve leveraging expertise from various fields, including but not limited to technology, psychology, and media studies. Combining knowledge from these fields, we can better understand how disinformation spreads and affects people's beliefs and behaviors.

It is crucial to recognize that disinformation can have severe consequences, such as undermining democracy, public health, and safety. Therefore, we must ensure that people can access accurate and reliable information. By developing comprehensive strategies that consider

the complex nature of the problem, we can combat disinformation and promote a healthy and informed society.

Tom Nichols is particularly concerned about the younger generation's apparent disdain for expertise. He largely attributes the ongoing erosion of authority and expertise to this demographic. However, this viewpoint expresses generational bias more than an insightful analysis of the broader issue. According to the study "*Misinformation and Its Correction*" by Lewandowsky et al., the problem of misinformation is neither new nor confined to any particular age group. By placing the blame squarely on the shoulders of the younger generation, Nichols is *guilty of oversimplification*, potentially perpetuating generational mistrust and undermining collective efforts to tackle misinformation and its consequences.

Moreover, Nichols' proposal to return to a more hierarchical expertise structure is troubling. While there is no denying the value of qualified, expert opinions, his argument raises concerns about stifling intellectual diversity. A society that puts too much emphasis on a particular kind of expertise risks becoming rigid, unable to adapt to new challenges or entertain innovative solutions. In his work "*Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*," Henry Jenkins advocates for a more nuanced approach. Jenkins argues that we should be equipping people with the analytical tools they need to engage in what he terms "collective intelligence" (Jenkins). Nichols' focus on traditional forms of expertise could unintentionally obstruct these more democratic, participatory avenues of knowledge production and problem-solving.

Lastly, Nichols posits that reverting to conventional expertise is the panacea for our current informational woes. However, this stance seems reductive, given the complexities of the digital age. The study "*Disinformation: A Bibliometric Review*" by Wang et al. outlines that

combating disinformation is far from straightforward and requires an interdisciplinary approach. This includes not just a reliance on subject-matter experts but also educational initiatives that help people critically assess information (Wang et al.). Nichols' argument falls short by not acknowledging these complexities and the multifaceted solutions required to effectively tackle the challenges of disinformation.

In "*The Death of Expertise*," Tom Nichols cogently raises a significant concern about the diminishing role of expertise in public discourse. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the issue is not as starkly black-and-white as he portrays. While the internet is undeniably a source of misinformation, it also provides an unprecedented platform for collaboration and democratization of knowledge. Instead of dismantling this new public square, we must strive to better equip its participants with the skills and tools necessary to navigate the complexities of the digital age.

As Jenkins emphasizes, a more participatory culture is required, where people are trained to use analytical tools effectively. Acknowledging that misinformation is a pervasive and complex issue can help us develop multi-disciplinary solutions, as the Lewandowsky et al. and Wang et al. studies recommended. These studies emphasize the importance of a collaborative approach to tackling misinformation, which recognizes that the issue is not solely confined to the domain of experts.

It is time to move beyond traditional hierarchies of expertise and foster a culture of critical thinking and informed debate. It is crucial to equip people with the skills necessary to participate effectively in public discourse while respecting the expertise of those who have dedicated their careers to studying specific fields. A nuanced understanding of the potential and pitfalls of the digital age is essential to navigating this era successfully.

In summary, Nichols' warning about the erosion of respect for expertise is timely and thought-provoking. However, a more nuanced approach is required to address the complexities of the digital age. We must *strive* to develop a balanced approach that encourages critical thinking while respecting expertise, and we must embrace the internet's potential for collaboration and democratization while equipping people with the skills necessary to participate effectively in public discourse.

Works Cited

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