New book explores contemporary attitudes toward experts

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"They say, 'oh, Trump doesn't have experts,'" The Donald told a crowd in Wisconsin in 2016.

"They say, 'Donald Trump needs a foreign policy adviser'….But supposing I didn't have one. Would it be worse than what we're doing now?"

In the fall, the man who claimed that Barack Obama was born in Kenya and charged that Senator Ted Cruz's father was involved in the assassination of John F. Kennedy, took his assault on knowledge all the way to the White House.

In "The Death of Expertise," Tom Nichols, a professor of National Security Affairs at the U.S. Naval War College, acknowledges that anti-intellectualism is as old as America, but makes a compelling case that there is something new – and ominous – about contemporary attitudes toward experts. These days, he writes, "the issue is not indifference to established knowledge; it's the emergence of a positive hostility to such knowledge."

On conspiracy theories
"The Death of Expertise" is engaging and informative.

Conspiracy theories, Nichols reminds, are ubiquitous in 21st century America. Almost a third of Americans, for example, believe that a secret elite is conspiring to take over the world;15 percent that the media or government adds mind-control techniques to television broadcasts; half of respondents think Princess Diana was murdered; and substantial numbers are certain that UFOs are prowling the skies and aliens have landed.

"Confirmation bias" is so powerful with baby boomers, GenXers, and millennials, Nichols suggests, because they have been taught "that their feelings override every other consideration."

The usual suspects
Nichols also points out that experts discredit their expertise when they move from explanation to prediction. And when they opine, as they are wont to do, on areas outside their expertise.

In analyzing the death of expertise, however, Nichols rounds up the usual suspects: higher education, the Internet and social media, and the "new" journalism. His discussion of these factors, alas, often recycles familiar themes, and is, at times, superficial and simplistic.

In a one-size-fits-all chapter on higher education, for example, Nichols ex
colleges and universities cater to the whims of undergraduates (with plus
dining halls), hand out high grades and unearned praise in the classroom students to believe that their views are every bit as valid as those of their
Nichols does not give Wikipedia nearly enough credit for trying – and ofte
procedures to ensure that its entries are accurate. And his "unsparing" cri
experienced" to get their stories right," underestimates the pressure to
and partisan spinners (and fail to distinguish one from the other.) Nor doe
the number of experienced and knowledgeable reporters in newspapers.

Opine on experts
Despite these limitations, "The Death of Expertise" conveys an urgently
And woe to our democracy, Nichols implies, when a leader can decide to bomb a distant nation, support a health care policy, scrap a climate change agreement because he “knows” that his “alternative facts” are as good – or better – than those of an expert.

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