

In Defence of Expertise

Written by Robert W. Murray

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ROBERT W. MURRAY, DEC 16 2013

What exactly is an 'expert' and with the incredible databases of knowledge available to the general public, is there really a need for experts anymore? Further, do they still exist beyond the ivory towers of academia?

I have often believed that expertise is essential in human society precisely because we cannot know everything about everything all of the time. Expertise is not limited to doctoral degrees, and spans all aspects of human life – mechanics, carpenters, physiotherapists, sports coaches – all of these professions are examples of experts in a given area derived from years of education, training and practice.

Focusing on academic expertise is a very different ball game. From the time I began my graduate school education, to the time I finished my PhD and beyond, I received more questions about the purpose of my degree and why I would bother to put myself through intellectual boot camp when most of the knowledge I was studying was “common sense”. It never ceases to amaze me how certain bodies of thought, most notably the humanities or social sciences, are insulted or delegitimized when compared to natural sciences or medicine. My favourite question during my PhD days was, “oh you’re studying politics? Does that mean you want to be Prime Minister?” No, actually I’d prefer to be the guy the PM calls for advice, but thanks for your vote.

Even the title of “Doctor” is questioned, as it is widely assumed that medical doctors and dentists have earned their right to call themselves doctor because they *might* be able to save lives (emphasize *might*), whereas the rest of us lazy hermits with PhD’s know a lot about very little and practice nothing. In fact, it seems to be commonly assumed that anyone can get a PhD if they only had the time. I have lost count of how many times I have heard, “oh, I thought about doing my PhD but I got married/I had kids/I didn’t see the purpose/*insert dumb excuse here.” If I had known how easy it was to get a PhD and become an expert, I would have done it during my childhood to avoid all of those “real life” events that seem to prevent virtually everyone from getting theirs.

I had long internalized my frustrations regarding the declining respect for expertise until this past week when two colleagues at the US Naval War College sparked a fascinating, and in my opinion important, debate. It began with Dr. Tom Nichols proclaiming the “Death of Expertise” in a blog post. In it, Nichols made a series of arguments regarding the decline in acknowledgement of expertise based on the availability of Wikipedia articles, blogs, and websites that seem to provide expertise to those bothering to read. Nichols contends this death is incredibly dangerous:

“The death of expertise is a rejection not only of knowledge, but of the ways in which we gain knowledge and learn about things. It’s a rejection of science. It’s a rejection, really, of the foundation of Western civilization: yes, that paternalistic, racist, ethnocentric approach to knowledge that created the nuclear bomb, the Edsel, and New Coke, but which also keeps diabetics alive, lands mammoth airliners in the dark, and writes documents like the Charter of the United Nations. I’m not limiting this complaint to politics...No, we now live in a world where the perverse effect of the death of expertise is that, without real experts, everyone is an expert on everything.”

On the heels of Nichols’ post came a discussion by Dr. John Schindler who proclaimed he was sparking the “Revolt of the Experts”. Schindler focuses primarily on the ridiculous levels of personal attack he has received as a result of his comments over the Snowden/Greenwald mess over Twitter and his blog, but he makes one key point worthy of

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mention: “Some people really are experts and others are not. What I know, I know, and I don’t pretend special knowledge of the many more topics where I’m anything but an expert. I recommend others to do the same.”

As a disclaimer, I do not know Nichols or Schindler personally but I have bantered with them over social media and have great respect for their comments, their work, and more, for their engagement with the public on social science and policy issues. I agree with them on some things (ie. Snowden is a traitor) and disagree with them on others but there is never a doubt in my mind when I agree or disagree with them that it is solely based on the issues, and never crosses the line into personal attack. They also have far more followers and readers than I do, so I’m like their poor cousin in the world of public intellectualism.

Returning to the issue of expertise, I absolutely believe there is a place, and a need, for experts in modern society perhaps more so now than ever before. Access to articles does not make one an expert or even informed. How often do people look for who wrote the article and what their credentials are to be commenting on a situation/issue in the first place? I made reference to this in a previous e-IR blog post about what I term as “academic territory” when academics attack others for commenting on things they see as their turf. In the end, expertise is not bestowed upon oneself by hours of reading blogs, following real experts on Twitter, and launching personal attacks on those experts who attempt to ignite intellectual debate on vital issues of public interest. No, expertise is earned through years of work, thought, and peer review.

In my own experience, I have received far more hate mail than notes of support, ranging from the ever-pleasant “do more research” or “you’re an idiot” reactions, to death threats or comparisons to 20th century dictators (I don’t know why I always get compared to Stalin over the others, by the way). I have been confronted at malls, gyms, grocery stores and in the halls of the university by those who disagree with me so strongly that they could not possibly walk past me and say hello without telling me how profoundly awful I am. So I am proud to stand with the likes of Nichols and Schindler and make these final observations:

1. Expertise is important in a world that prefers to read the Wikipedia version of everything;
2. Public engagement is great, debate is even better, but keep the personal attacks out of it;
3. Yes I will be wrong, sometimes very wrong, but I firmly believe I will know more than you do about why I was wrong;
4. Telling me to “do more research” is unlikely to be met kindly as I will bet my bottom dollar you’ve done little to none;
5. PhD’s are “real doctors” and help people more than you may think; and
6. The study of social science and policy is just as difficult as any other field, so please stop assuming that “rocket science” is more impressive or difficult. Rockets don’t talk back.

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Read more from Robert W. Murray on his e-IR blog [Power, Security and Self-Help: A Blog of International Reality](#).

About the author:

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