

Braver Angels Book Discussion Guide

The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge & Why it Matters, by Tom Nichols

Optional resources for pre-discussion reading and reflection

2014 article in The Federalist in which Tom Nichols introduces the idea of “the death of expertise:”
<https://thefederalist.com/2014/01/17/the-death-of-expertise/>

Interview with Tom Nichols on The Agenda with Steve Paikin: <https://youtu.be/ukEQrnBn15o>

Discussion questions

1. Google and online media have created both an illusion of expertise and a forum for uninformed engagement, according to Nichols. While it’s certainly a good thing to be able to access with a few keystrokes how to fix your sink, the capital of Montenegro, or your local government’s responses to COVID-19, it’s not such a good thing when “Distance and anonymity remove patience and presumptions of goodwill. Rapid access to information and the ability to speak without having to listen...kill conversation.” Braver Angels embraces the idea that conversation among citizens who disagree is essential for a healthy democracy, yet, according to Nichols, conversation has become “exhausting” as people engage in fact battles or retreat to echo chambers where their biases are confirmed. *How do you feel about your own ability and opportunities to engage in political conversation in the face of these trends?*
2. Nichols bemoans what he calls the “democratization of knowledge”... “Citizens no longer understand democracy to mean a condition of political equality, in which one person gets one vote, and every individual is no more and no less equal in the eyes of the law. Rather, Americans now think of democracy as a state of actual equality, in which every opinion is as good as any other on almost any subject under the sun. Feelings are more important than facts: if people *think* vaccines are harmful, or if they *believe* that half of the US budget is going to foreign aid, then it is ‘undemocratic’ and ‘elitist’ to contradict them.” The book explores the dangers and downsides of this trend. *Can you think of any ways in which Americans’ rejection of experts and technocrats could be positive?*
3. Nichols asserts that America’s colleges and universities have contributed to the death of expertise through a shift to what he calls “college as a client-centered experience” in which students expect to be catered to as paying customers rather than challenged by exposure to objectionable ideas or high academic standards. *To what extent do you think this is true? What do you think is the appropriate role of higher education in preparing students to participate in our democracy?*

The Braver Angels Mission

- We try to understand the other side’s point of view, even if we don’t agree with it.
- We engage those we disagree with, looking for common ground and ways to work together.
- We support principles that bring us together rather than divide us.