DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 26.05.2021 | Pia Bungarten & Reinhard Krumm

Why we need experts

With social media, echo chambers are increasingly replacing nuanced debate. But listening to expert opinion has never been more important

We live in a world where things are both getting better and worse. Life expectancy continues to increase across all continents, while child mortality continues to fall. At the same time, however, the very idea of democracy as the foundation of a better society – and the competence of political decision-makers – is being fundamentally questioned. And even more worrisome, there are massive challenges politicians need to tackle, whether it's accelerating climate change or the fact that peace and security are increasingly fragile across the world.

To find solutions to these challenges and push back against the democratic erosion, we need people who can continuously and reliably analyse threats, challenges and opportunities and present their analyses to decision-makers. In short, we need experts.

These experts are scholars from academia and think tanks, as well as members of civil society or former decision-makers who rarely appear in the public eye but have a deep and carefully considered knowledge in their area of expertise. With this, they can offer competent advice to those who eventually have to take the real political decisions.

Beyond black and white

To hold a balanced position in today's polarised environment is almost an act of bravery. As Ezra Klein puts it, 'on highly politicized issues, people's actual definition of 'expert' is a credentialed person who agrees with me'. It's not only on social media that echo chambers endanger nuanced debate. In the pursuit of short-term objectives, self-designated 'experts' from lobby and pressure groups can drown out the impartial analysis of the genuine expert.

This is unfortunately only one of many examples

Such groups usually see issues in black and white. Their logic is: the louder they are, the

where volume trumps expertise.

more influence they might get. That might have its reasons. But with social media there is no shortage of opportunities to turn up the volume – everyone can say something, whether true or not, whether fact or opinion or deliberate misinformation. Despite these pitfalls, social media increasingly stands in for public discussion, which then has an impact on political decisions, even in foreign policy.

Next to the Covid-19 pandemic and climate, maintaining peace and security in a turbulent world poses perhaps the most important challenge for humanity at the moment. Most countries in the West see China and Russia as competitors or even adversaries . Political decision-makers – not only in states but also in organisations such as NATO and the EU – are wondering how to deal with numerous challenges, including a whole range of disarmament agreements as well as the threats posed by climate change. At the same time, China and Russia are finding more in common with each other, often in opposition to what they see as Western interference.

Cancelled?

Could there be any better moment to invite experts into one's office to navigate stormy seas? Experts with a nuanced analysis and a clear eye for priorities. Experts who have shown a willingness to try to resolve problems, rather than exacerbating them by engaging in a blame game. Experts who are not blinded by emotion and self-righteousness.

Experts like Matt Rojansky, the highly regarded long-term director of the Wilson Center's Kennan Institute, who was recently the leading candidate to become the Russia director on the US government's National Security Council – until hawkish opponents of his pragmatic and open-minded approach loudly campaigned against him. They refused to accept any candidate who does not bow to their pre-conceived notions of security. US relations with Russia or China are critical here, as there's bipartisan support in the US Congress for a more heavy-handed approach. But politicians and decision-makers need different perspectives to avoid foreign policy disasters.

We live in unprecedented times, and there are no blueprints for what's to come.

This is unfortunately only one of many examples where volume trumps expertise. The more complex the matter, the greater the urge for fast and clear answers, often based less on knowledge than on conviction.

We see this within the EU but also on the European continent and beyond. Speaking on the condition of anonymity, one expert from an Eastern European country pointed out that there matters are rarely debated in public because of the almost religious extremism on both sides – no pros and cons but only good or bad, right or wrong according to each side's standpoint. A European politician, who also preferred not to be named, remarked that it is no longer possible to bring people from opposing sides into the same room for a civilised conversation.

The best possible advice

Pre-conceived ideas, however, by their very nature make open debate impossible. One cannot possibly tackle the current global complexities without a willingness to see more sides of an issue and to occasionally concede the need for compromise. Especially now, in the face of challenges that impact the entire globe, we need the cool and rational analysis and advice of experts – from think tanks, universities and specialised NGOs. Nuanced counsel should be an important part of the decision-making process, with the final say lying in the hands of elected politicians.

For these politicians to make the best possible decisions, they need to ensure that they are surrounded by the best possible advisors. People who are willing to speak truth to power in calm and reasoned voices, which deserve to be heard above all of the shouting – even if their solutions might seem to contradict mainstream opinion.

We live in unprecedented times, and there are no blueprints for what's to come. These are precisely the circumstances that demand more – not less – debate: honest, controversial and even heated discussions. This is the only way to produce the best possible solutions – not only to tackle immediate threats and challenges but also to lay the foundations for effective and viable long-term strategies.



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