

March for Science: How Democracy Kills Expertise



By Alex Berezow, PhD — March 20, 2017



Credit: Shutterstock [1]

The war on expertise is not a new phenomenon. Nearly 60 years before Tom Nichols published his bestselling book, *The Death of Expertise* [2], author C.S. Lewis wrote about it in an essay titled "Screwtape Proposes a Toast," a follow-up to his internationally renowned book *The Screwtape Letters*.

In the novel, a senior devil, Screwtape, writes a series of letters to a junior devil, Wormwood, on how to be a good tempter. Thus, every moral pronouncement in the book is precisely the opposite of how humans ought to behave. The Enemy, to whom Screwtape refers constantly, is God.

In his toast, Screwtape explains to a large gathering of "gentledevils" how the concept of democracy can be perverted to undermine a society:

Democracy is the word with which you must lead them by the nose... You are to use the word purely as an incantation; if you like, purely for its selling power. It is a name they venerate. And of course it is connected with the political ideal that men should be equally treated. You then make a stealthy transition in their minds from this political ideal to a factual belief that all men are equal.

Mr. Lewis says that this belief leads people to another: "I'm as good as you." In other words, democracy not only leads people to believe that all humans are of equal value (which is true), but all humans are equal in their abilities, thoughts, and behaviors (which is completely false). Yet, many people in a democracy believe the latter. And it leads to a very bad outcome:

What I want to fix your attention on is the vast, overall movement towards the discrediting, and finally the elimination, of every kind of human excellence—moral, cultural, social, or intellectual. And is it not pretty to notice how Democracy (in the incantatory sense) is now doing for us the work that was once done by the most ancient Dictatorships, and by the same methods?

How incredibly prescient. This passage could have been written in 2017, but it was published six decades ago by a man who fought in World War I. Expertise dies in a democracy.

Consider scientific knowledge. The public rejects any notion of "consensus," despite the fact it is a [crucial part of the scientific method](#) [3]. On a whole host of issues -- from GMOs and vaccines to nuclear power and climate change -- the public believes it knows better than PhDs and MDs who have spent their entire lives studying these topics. Besides, citizens say, scientists telling people what to believe is fundamentally undemocratic.

Mr. Lewis warned us years ago. Will we listen?

The Know-Nothing "March for Science"

Probably not. The organizers of the "March for Science," the latest misguided manifestation of democracy, have culturally appropriated science to push a purely political agenda. We were among the march's [early critics](#) [4] because it was clear to us that [science had taken a back seat to partisanship](#) [5].

Others are finally taking notice. The Mad Virologist, in a [blog post](#) [6], writes:

I have to join the growing number of scientists who won't be participating in the march. Part of my problem with the group and the movement stems from the fact that it is disorganized and has become co-opted by those advocating for pseudoscience.

Who are some of those groups? Center for Biological Diversity (anti-GMO), Union of Concerned Scientists (anti-GMO, anti-nuclear), Center for Science in the Public Interest (fearmongering about "chemicals"), and Earth Day Network (anti-GMO). So, the Mad Virologist is calling it quits.

Protesters in 2017 are fond of shouting, "This is what democracy looks like." Uneducated and scientifically illiterate? Let's hope not.

How Do We Fix This?

I have been asked, over and over again, "How do we educate the public about science?" Unfortunately, simply stating the facts won't work, as psychology research has shown. The best solution, perhaps, is the cliché, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

Until the public is convinced that scientists and journalists care about truth and society, then I fear all of our labors will be in vain.

COPYRIGHT © 1978-2016 BY THE AMERICAN COUNCIL ON SCIENCE AND HEALTH

Source URL: <https://www.acsh.org/news/2017/03/20/march-science-how-democracy-kills-expertise-11026>

Links

[1] <https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/sheep-within-mob-turn-check-out-104360954>

[2] <https://www.amazon.com/Death-Expertise-Campaign-Established-Knowledge/dp/0190469412/>

[3]

http://www.realclearscience.com/articles/2016/04/20/consensus_is_part_of_the_scientific_method_109606.html

[4] <http://acsh.org/news/2017/02/02/why-scientist-wont-be-attending-science-march-10811>

[5] <http://www.acsh.org/news/2017/01/26/dont-let-partisans-hijack-science-march-10777>

[6] <http://themadvirologist.blogspot.com/2017/03/why-i-wont-be-participating-in-march.html?source=acsh.org>