EXPERTS, KNOWLEDGE AND CRITICALITY IN THE AGE OF ‘ALTERNATIVE FACTS’: RE-EXAMINING THE CONTRIBUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Dr Neil Harrison
University of Oxford
3rd April 2019
SRHE Academic Practice network

@DrNeilHarrison
WHERE IT BEGAN...

- Special issue of *Teaching in Higher Education*
- Twelve articles from over 100 abstracts – four presented today
- Drawn from UK, US, Canada, Singapore, India and Australia
- Published March 2019
- www.tandfonline.com/toc/cthe20/24/3
Michael Gove: ‘people in this country have had enough of experts’ (Gove, 2016)

Erosion of traditional role of experts as creators and mediators of knowledge in society

Shift to an information-led society where most people have almost endless information freely available

A “‘bargain with modernity” governed by specific admixtures of deference and scepticism’ (Giddens, 1991, p.90)

But all of this has happened before… (Abdul-Jabbar, 2019)
Post-Enlightenment shift from facts to interpretations, subjectivities and perspectives (Nietzsche, 1873/1954; Lyotard, 1984)

It is ‘presentation, personal persuasive power, contacts, access to the media or the like which will provide the “individual finding” with the social attribute of “knowledge”’ (Beck, 1992, p.169)

The quest ‘to emancipate the public from prematurely naturalised, objectified facts’ has backfired to become ‘an excessive distrust of good matters of fact disguised as bad ideological biases’ (Latour, 2004, p.227, original emphasis)
Multiple roles of higher education:

- **Knowledge producer** – through research
- **Knowledge reproducer** – through teaching and knowledge exchange
- **Knowledge packager** – increasing role in pulling together knowledge for ‘sale’ in different formats

Disparate forms of expertise

Do these roles need to change in light of the post-truth world – and how?
The rise of social media and knowledge through acclamation

- ‘Erroneous beliefs [are] reinforced by social recognition’ (Farrow and Moe, 2019)
- ‘The internet appears to be structured so as to encourage people who enter it to confine their browsing to opinions they already accept’ (Bhatt and MacKenzie, 2019)

Loss of epistemic deference and erosion of epistemic communities

- ‘Institutions and disciplinary and professional communities responsible for higher expertise have insufficiently recognised the new context of a non-deferential society in which all assertions are challenged’ (Hordern, 2019)

Problematic relativism and naïve scepticism

- A ‘two sides to every story’ mindset leads to ‘a misreading of debates in postmodern epistemology and ethical relativism’ (Wright, 2019)
THE ROOTS OF THE PROBLEM (2)

- **Students’ desire for epistemic certainty**
  - ‘Fear of making mistakes makes students more likely to seek ready-made answers, rather than risking independent assessment of evidence’ (Cooper, 2019)
  - Ignorance is not a ‘mere lack of knowledge, a benign gap in knowledge or some epistemic oversight that needs only to be filled or rectified’ (Bhatt and MacKenzie, 2019)

- **Contestation of curricula**
  - Questioning ‘whose authority determines what is to be learned’ (Farrow and Moe, 2019)

- **Marketisation of higher education and hegemony of the ‘global north’**
  - ‘Protest movements may have revealed the flaws in the home curriculum, but that curriculum is nonetheless being exported to [the global south] at an increasing rate’ (Park and McGregor, 2019)
Renewed relevance through interdisciplinarity
*Rihla*: ‘non-regional, nonconformist, and diversifying’ (Abdul-Jabbar, 2019)

(Re)claiming spaces through public intellectualism
‘If educators don’t act to fill public space then others will’ (Farrow and Moe, 2019)

Reinvigoration of epistemic structures
‘Interrogate different sets of assumptions and different worldviews’ (Cooper, 2019)

Teaching for an information-complex world
‘a critical awareness of [...] how ways of thinking and being are culturally produced and re-produced and sponsored’ (Bhatt and MacKenzie, 2019)
EXPERTS, KNOWLEDGE AND CRITICALITY IN THE AGE OF ‘ALTERNATIVE FACTS’: RE-EXAMINING THE CONTRIBUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Dr Neil Harrison
University of Oxford
3rd April 2019
SRHE Academic Practice network

@DrNeilHarrison