

ПАНОРАМА

УДК 167.7; 001.8

DOI: 10.5840/dspl20203110

НУЖНО ЛИ ДЕМОКРАТИЯМ ЗНАНИЕ?

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Данная статья предлагает обзор и размышления над книгой Гарри Коллинза и Роберта Эванса «Почему демократиям нужна наука». Особый интерес автора вызывает предложенный ими институт Сов (The Owls). Красной нитью через книгу проходит тема пост-правды, которую Коллинз и Эванс пытаются проработать. В данной статье концепции пост-правды посвящен первый раздел. Во втором разделе рассматриваются «птицы науки» – система классификации, разработанная Коллинзом и Эвансом по аналогии с известным высказыванием Ричарда Фейнмана о философии науки. Будут рассмотрены «ученые-орлы», «ястребы-фундаменталисты» и «философы-апологеты-стервятники»; далее внимание будет уделено «совам науки». Собственно, последним посвящен третий раздел. «Совы» представляют собой институт, предложенный Коллинзом и Эвансом: он включает социологов, а также сторонников строгого аналитического подхода к социальному анализу науки [Collins, Evans, 2017, p. 78]. Роль «сов» состоит в максимально качественных консультациях политиков в эпоху пост-правды. При этом цель данной статьи заключается в обосновании того, что идея института Сов не является достаточным механизмом для деятельности в эпоху пост-правды. После описания концепции «сов» я перехожу в четвертом разделе к рассмотрению проблемы их нейтральности, поскольку консенсус не гарантирует установление истины или достоверности. В пятом разделе обсуждается проблема «сов» и демократии, поскольку Коллинз и Эванс не дают определенный типу демократии, в котором «совы» будут действовать. В шестом разделе отмечается исключительность, присущая институту Сов, поскольку она ограничивает членство в нем исключительно двумя профессиями и, по-видимому, делает этот институт элитарным. Наконец, в заключении я задаюсь вопросом о том, какое все это имеет значение для исследований в области науки и технологий. На мой взгляд, институт Сов все же недостаточен в эпоху пост-правды.

Ключевые слова: эпоха пост-правды, совы, демократия, наука и технологии, политики, консенсус, эксперты, эксклюзивность

Цитирование: Shields J. Do Democracies Need KnOWLedge? // Цифровой ученый: лаборатория философа. 2020. Т. 3. № 1. С. 123-131. DOI: 10.5840/dspl20203110

DO DEMOCRACIES NEED KNOWLEDGE?

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This paper serves to review the book *Why Democracies Need Science*, written by Harry Collins and Robert Evans. Of particular interest to this paper is the institution of The Owls, which Collins and Evans propose in their text. A theme which is present throughout the book, a theme which Collins and Evans seek to work through is that of post-truth; the first section of the paper will address the concept of post-truth. Next, the birds of science will be examined, in the second section; this is a classification system Collins and Evans develop, from a borrowed analogy from Richard Feynman. After examining the eagle scientists, the hawk scientific fundamentalists, and the vulture philosopher-apologists, attention will be paid to The Owls of science. The third section pertains to The Owls. The Owls are an institution which Collins and Evans note and which includes social scientists and those with a rigorous understanding of the social analysis of science [Collins, Evans, 2017, p. 78]. The role of The Owls is to serve to better advise politicians in a post-truth era. The purpose of this paper is to argue that the theorized institution of The Owls is an insufficient mechanism to deal with a post-truth era. After introducing The Owls, the fourth section of the paper considers the neutrality of an Owl, as a consensus does not guarantee truth or correctness. The fifth section then examines The Owls and democracy, as Collins and Evans do not specify the type of democracy in which The Owls would operate. The sixth section notes the exclusivity present within the institution of The Owls, as it is restricted to only two occupations, and is seemingly elitist. Finally, I conclude by asking the question – what does this mean for science and technology studies? As the institution of The Owls seems like an insufficient one to deal with a post-truth era.

Keywords: post-truth era, The Owls, democracy, science and technology studies, politicians, consensus, experts, exclusivity

Might be cited as: Shields, Jennifer. 2020. Do Democracies Need KnOWLedge?, *The Digital Scholar: Philosopher’s Lab*, 3 (1): 123-131. DOI: 10.5840/dspl20203110

Harry Collins and Robert Evans wrote the book *Why Democracies Need Science*. This paper will be focused on that particular work of Collins and Evans. Of interest to this paper is the institution of The Owls, which Collins and Evans propose in their text. This paper will first address the concept of post-truth. Next, the birds of science will be examined. Third, the institution of The Owls will be explored. Fourth, the neutrality of The Owls will come into question. Fifth, the democracy Collins and Evans refer to will be examined, as will the role The Owls will play within a democratic framework. Sixth, it will be noted that the category of The Owls is an exclusive one, and this will be questioned. In conclusion, a section is dedicated to the implications of the work by Collins and Evans and what this will mean for science and technology studies. The purpose of this paper is to argue that the theorized institution of The Owls is an insufficient mechanism to deal with a post-truth era.

1. Post-Truth

The word, 'post-truth', was word of the year in 2016 according to the Oxford Dictionary [Fuller, 2016, p. 1]. It has been written that, "The combination of recent lows in campaign rhetoric and the rise of fake news has led some to suggest that we are living in an age of 'post-truth politics' – a world in which truth is less important than public attitudes and where everyone has their own (often incompatible) 'facts'" [Rose, 2017, p. 556]. Thomas Kuhn, a central figure in science and technology studies, is thought to have a post-truth account of science. Steve Fuller writes, "What makes Kuhn's account of science 'post-truth' is that truth is no longer the arbiter of legitimate power but rather the mask of legitimacy that is worn by everyone in pursuit of power" [Fuller, 2016, p. 1]. While some, such as Fuller, embrace the post-truth era, others, such as Sergio Sismondo, only write of its possibility. Sismondo writes, "The enormous attention to 'fake news', with much effort to distinguish the real and the fake, shows that many people are concerned that we may be entering a post-truth era" [Sismondo, 2017, p. 4]. Where Sismondo discredits the role of science and technology studies in ushering in a post-truth era of post-truth politics, Collins and Evans argue that scientific contribution be mobilized [Collins, Evans, Weinel, 2017, p. 583]. Collins, Evans, and Martin Weinel write, "there is nothing wrong with Sismondo urging STS [Science and Technology Studies] scholars to engage in political work to support democratic institutions but, unless our scientific contribution is mobilized too, STS can be no more than one political actor among many" [ibid.]. What Collins, Evans, and Weinel advocate for, is to utilize scientific understanding in science and expertise, because they argue, "this is what allows us to make a distinctive intervention that is not available to other political actors" [ibid.].

2. The Birds of Science

Collins and Evans borrow an analogy from Richard Feynman, “Feynman is said to have scornfully remarked that ‘philosophy of science is about as useful to scientists as ornithology is to birds’” [Collins, Evans, 2017, p. 76]. Utilizing Feynman’s analogy, Collins and Evans classify the majority of scientists as eagles [ibid., p. 78]. Collins and Evans write, “Eagles are efficient hunters who find it hard to look in anything other than the forward direction” [ibid.]. Within the category of eagles, scientific fundamentalists are classified as hawks [ibid.]. The hawks may utilize advertising and propaganda [ibid.]. Collins and Evans do not speak kindly of the hawks, writing, “The hawks rip into scientific heresies with the vigour of religious inquisitions, even employing magicians as rack-masters” [ibid., p. 79]. Most unkindly, though, do Collins and Evans treat philosopher-apologists. Collins and Evans insist that philosopher-apologists be called vultures [ibid.]. Collins and Evans state that the philosopher-apologists “digest the carrion left by the hawks, providing a pseudo-academic rationale for the alliance, and too often betraying the very concept of philosophy by ignoring doubts and subtleties” [ibid.]. After calling down scientists and philosophers, classifying them as eagles, hawks, and vultures, Collins and Evans introduce an institution of The Owls.

3. The Owls

Utilizing the concepts of Feynman’s birds, Collins and Evans create a category of Owls. The purpose of The Owls, for Collins and Evans, is to better advise politicians in a post-truth era. Owls differ from the birds previously mentioned, as they can turn their heads almost completely around. Collins and Evans write, “they [The Owls] can choose to look in two different directions and find it easy to compartmentalize” [Collins, Evans, 2017, p. 78]. An Owl, one with scientific integrity, who is a social scientist, has two compartments: one for doing science and a compartment for analysis [ibid., p. 77]. Owls are not only social scientists though, for this category is open to those in the natural sciences who have a rigorous understanding of the social analysis of science [ibid., p. 78].

Owls may be thought of as distinct from other birds, for a tendency, “of science’s eagles and hawks is that they tend to judge scientific value by results” [ibid., p. 79]. The task of the owl is to engage in the current atmosphere of expert knowledge, then to gather their findings, report on any consensus which they grade a letter, and finally to deliver their information to the politicians [ibid., p. 86]. Collins and Evans write, “the grade is as important as the substance of the consensus” [ibid., p. 95]. The politicians can then use the information, the graded consensus, or choose to overrule it [ibid., p. 86]. “The Owls would, essentially, do the job of the Chief Scientific Advisor, advising on the substance and de-

gree of consensus about some technical issue” [ibid., p. 91]. The rationale of Collins and Evans for The Owls is that no matter what the choice is decided by the politicians, the politicians’ choice would have been informed by the best possible evidence available [ibid., p. 96]. Another role of The Owls serves the public. It is stated that The Owls’ “reports and conclusions would need to be a matter of public record” [ibid., p. 91]. It is an important task of The Owls to make public aware of the fact that certain material in a dispute is unreliable [ibid., p. 86–87].

4. Considering the Neutrality of an Owl

In deciding on a consensus, The Owl is urged to do so disinterestedly [Collins, Evans, 2017, p. 85]. Collins and Evans write, “in an ideal world, the scientists would not know which position on the matter they themselves support” [ibid.]. Note the phrase, in an ideal world, Collins and Evans are dealing in a realm of theory rather than reality. Chillingly, Collins and Evans state that findings on consensus will have wider legitimacy, “if it is *seen to come* from outside the technical community” [ibid.]. The italicized ‘seen to come’ is frightening because it refers to an appearance rather than an actuality; this passage came across as manipulative, as the public could be manipulated into thinking information has come from outside the specified community, when in actuality it may have come from within. Curiously, Collins and Evans seemingly embrace deception, if this was what was intended by their use of italicization.

The notion of consensus and the reliance Collins and Evans have on consensus seem troubling. For a consensus does not guarantee truth or correctness. Collins and Evans write, “It is not the job of The Owls to say which of the arguing parties are right about science. The social scientists do not have the qualifications” [Collins, Evans, 2017, p. 88]. It seems that Collins and Evans are aware that their notion of consensus does not correspond with truth because they write, “The policymaker, whose job has to be to make the best decision in the short term – even if in the long term turns out not to be right – must start with consensus, not the truth” [ibid.]. It seems that a consensus is only a measure of popularity, so a consensus among experts would reap the popular result, not always the right result. It seems that The Owls are straight out of Plato’s *Protagoras*. The Owls are “like the dealers, wholesale or retail, who sell the food of the body, for they praise indiscriminately all their goods without knowing what is really beneficial or hurtful for the body” [Plato, 1956, 313 d]. This may be stated, because The Owls only gauge a consensus, rather than the truth. Furthermore, ancient philosophers have warned of following a consensus. Heraclitus writes, “For what intelligence or understanding have they? They believe in the bards of the people and use the mass as teacher, not knowing that, ‘Many are bad, few are good’” (Cited in [Chitwood, 2004, p. 62]). For a book advocating *Why Democracies Need Science*, it is curious why

the authors package scientific findings into consensus because consensus does not mean truth, it only refers to a popular choice.

Collins and Evans write that The Owls, “would be a statutory committee appointed in a politically neutral way with full scrutiny of the appointing procedure” [Collins, Evans, 2017, p. 91]. Yet they do not outline just how The Owls would be appointed. It seems that The Owls are ideally neutral, but in practice this would be hard to fathom. The Owls would have a lot of responsibility, as they report to the politicians, and with such power it is not unlikely that some will be corrupt and fall guilty of accepting bribes from specific communities in order to influence politics. Also, it is unclear as to whether The Owls would occupy their position for a term or for life, in reality this would have to be determined and might also greatly influence the behavior of The Owls as they may act differently considering how long they will occupy their positions. Viewed from this location, it seems that The Owls could easily transform into forms of lobbyists, as Owls are designed to influence voting, and this is done for compensation, assuming that The Owls are paid for their work.

5. *The Owls and Democracy*

For Collins and Evans, science is a central feature of democracy [Collins, Evans, 2017, p. 82]. It seems though, that Collins and Evans’ argument for why they specifically target a democratic model as being the most suitable to choose, appears to stem from one sole source. This sole source is Robert Merton. Merton wrote of norms of science and, “thought that democracy best embodied scientific values so democratic societies would best foster an efficacious science” [ibid., p. 46]. It will be noted too that details are left out of the book *Why Democracies Need Science*. In the book *Why Democracies Need Science*, no specified form of democracy is mentioned: all that is included is theory from thinkers John Dewey, Walter Lippmann, John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, Heather Douglas, and Philip Kitcher. Collins and Evans embrace democracy writing, “we have followed Durant in focusing on deliberative approaches to democracy, and like him, see our approach as being closest to Rawls” [ibid., p. 131]. Rawls embraces the framework of a, “constitutional democracy that gives priority to certain fundamental rights and liberties, while expanding equal opportunities among all persons and guaranteeing a minimum social income for all” [Freeman, 2007, p. x]. While Rawls advocates for a constitutional democracy, Collins and Evans seemingly remain silent on the topic within their book. It seems a mistake Collins and Evans so strongly advocate for democracy yet do not outline how that democracy would take form. Collins and Evans may want to appeal to a specific formulation of democracy such as a direct democracy or a constitutional democracy, for example, so that readers may fully grasp the ideology of Collins and Evans.

Without appealing to a specific form of democracy Collins and Evans do avoid critique, as a specified form of democracy, which is cur-

rently in practice, may be easy to criticize. A problem is that Collins and Evans work, *Why Democracies Need Science*, remains theoretical rather than practical. This may be viewed as a problem because Collins and Evans advocate for practical solutions, but only in theory making it difficult to render their conception of The Owls ever existing, in reality, as theorized.

The issue of advocating practical solutions in theory becomes clear when Collins and Evans write of how politicians will interact with The Owls. Collins and Evans boldly assert that with the introduction of The Owls, politicians will not be able to be biased by their own political preference, “they will no longer be able to pretend there is an economic consensus when there is none” [Collins, Evans, 2017, p. 93]. This does not appear to be the case though, because Collins and Evans also write that, “Politicians must clearly and transparently accept any policies that seem to arise from scientific consensus or, equally clearly and transparently, overturn them and make their own policies” [ibid.]. On the one hand, we have Collins and Evans telling readers that The Owls will prevent politicians from basing their decisions off political preferences [ibid.]. Yet within the same page, the authors state that politicians do not have to listen to The Owls; considering this, it seems questionable that the introduction of The Owls will rid the politicians of their political preferences [ibid.]. While Collins and Evans do seem to contradict themselves, within a page, it will be noted that the transparency the Owls provide on scientific consensus may hold the politicians more accountable. Importantly, this may not create a complete atmosphere of accountability within the sphere of politicians seeing as politicians may overturn the work of The Owls and create their own policies.

6. The Exclusivity of the Category of Owls

In referring to The Owls, Collins and Evans specify social scientists and natural scientists as being potential candidates [Collins, Evans, 2017, p. 77–78]. It is worrisome why Collins and Evans seemingly restricted this category, of The Owls, to only two different types of occupations. The elitism, which is seemingly pervasive throughout the work, as Collins and Evans consistently refer to experts, whom they seem to hold in high regard, is reminiscent of Plato’s *Republic*. This may be stated because in *the Republic* there is a strict division of labor which may be viewed as similar to the way Collins and Evans distinguish lay-people from experts. Collins and Evans write, “all the ‘right’ people will have a say in the technical debate, and those who have no relevant specialist expertise will contribute as citizens participating in existing democratic institutions” [ibid., p. 14]. The concept of the ‘right’ people, as Collins and Evans write, seems not well fleshed out, because what is extremely surprising is that philosophy is seemingly nowhere to be found in the account of The Owls. Recall that Collins and Evans classify philosopher-apologists as vultures, which seems quite homogenizing; for, according to Plato, true philosophy involves being, “guided by

the truth and [to] always pursue it in every way” [Plato, 1992, Book VI 489 d]. It seems Collins and Evans may have overlooked the field of philosophy when creating the institution of The Owls, but this is just one field which may have been left out of their definition; there may be more fields which should be included in the pool of potential Owls too. For it seems that a focus on truth would be more of a solution to a post-truth era, rather than Collins and Evans’ advocated measures of consensus and expertise. Therefore, it seems strange for Collins and Evans to homogenize philosopher-apologists, and to leave them out of the category of The Owls because according to Plato, philosophers are guided by and seek out the truth.

7. Conclusion – What Does This Mean for Science and Technology Studies?

Whether or not one believes that the post-truth era is present, looming, or non-existent, the scientific community has been addressing post-truth. Collins and Evans introduce an institution, which they call The Owls, who will grade consensus among experts and pass the consensus along to the politicians, while making their findings public. I have argued that The Owls are not as neutral as they seem. The Owls findings are supposed to look like they have come from outside of the community of experts, which is seemingly incredibly deceptive. Furthermore, a consensus does not ensure truth. It seems, too, that in practice The Owls might transform into a sort of lobby like group. I have noted that Collins and Evans do not specify which type of democracy they advocate for, which is troubling as it seems that they want their theory to be practically applied. In addition, it is thought by Collins and Evans that the institution of The Owls will prevent politicians from being biased due to political preferences; yet they state that politicians may overrule decisions made by The Owls, which seemingly overturns the previously asserted negation of political bias. Finally, it has been mentioned that the category of The Owls is an exclusive one, one which has no mention of the role of philosophy. From this it may be concluded that the institution of The Owls is an insufficient one to deal with a post-truth era. The institution of The Owls is a noble one, but one in which amendments have to be made in theory if it is wished to be carried out in practice. Within the field of science and technology studies, the topic of post-truth is an issue and it seems Collins and Evans present The Owls as a seeming solution to the post-truth climate; while their account of the institution of The Owls might seem problematic, this is not to say that it cannot be amended.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Поступила в редакцию 18.01.2020