

Just trust me

Macartan Humphreys

We should embrace the loss of trust in experts and insist on seeing the evidence that supports argumentation.

Many worry that the authority enjoyed by experts is under threat. The threat extends to scientists, but also to practitioners and policy makers. But discussions about the devaluation of expertise mix up two types of threat: The threat to *trust in experts* and the threat to the valuation of the kind of *evidence* that experts bring to public debate. Given these twin threats, my reading is that we should be less worried about the loss of trust in experts but double down on the imperative of providing evidence to back argumentation. This is the approach taken by movements that advocate evidence based policy and open science. Responding in this way could mean a weakening of a certain kind of authority – the authority of academic and policy experts that derives from their past successes rather than the specific evidence they bring to bear on the question at hand. But it clarifies that we value expertise because of the evidence that it can marshal and not because it can substitute for evidence.

A number of recent failures show the risks of trusting research claims rather than scrutinizing the evidence on which claims are made. Research by prom-

inent economists, for instance, provided evidence that high levels of debt produced an acute strain on GDP growth. If the work was influential, however, it was not because anyone could be convinced of their analysis. In fact, the results were sensitive to a simple error in the data. But this data was not made available for a long time, it was not required by the journals that published the work, not checked by reviewers, and not examined by other experts citing this expert knowledge. Broader surveys of literatures show how widespread the problem of unreliable published research is. A team of psychologists tried to replicate 100 prominent results – the average effects were only half as large in the replicated results as in the original results and most turned out not to be statistically significant. A recent piece by an economist reanalyzed results from over 50 prominent economics papers and found that the majority were plausibly spurious. In short, once researchers start scrutinizing the evidentiary basis of social scientific claims, the fragility of findings in social science is hard to ignore.

Given the fragility of published research you could sympathize with a policy maker who thought twice about turning to researchers for advice. Yet recent research has also called into question the expertise of policy makers. There are longstanding development practices, supported by enormous financial

investments, that are rooted in essentially evidence-free beliefs about what works. Huge amounts of development aid are spent, for instance, on interventions that seek to increase social cohesion in developing areas through participatory budgetary processes. The approach has been used in post conflict societies from Afghanistan, to Congo, to Sudan. Yet the evidence that it makes a difference is remarkably scant. In many studies, the estimated effect is around zero. Similar negative results have been found in other areas, such as skills training programs or governance interventions.

The reactions to these challenges by researchers and by policy makers have been varied. Some researchers have seen the challenge as a threat. Others have embraced transparency and sought to make the errors as easy to find and fix as possible – for themselves and for others. Alongside the increased humility has been the growth of strategies designed to reduce the risk of error and also make it easier for others to spot errors. These solutions largely push away from the idea of researchers as gurus, with deep intuitions, and towards a view of research as a collective, fallible, but self-correcting enterprise. New practices include “research registration” – a practice in which researchers specify, if they can, what analyses they plan to do before they do them. The point is not to prevent exploratory research but to make it difficult to claim that a study tested a hypothesis on the same data that was used to generate it. There is also a fast growing norm to

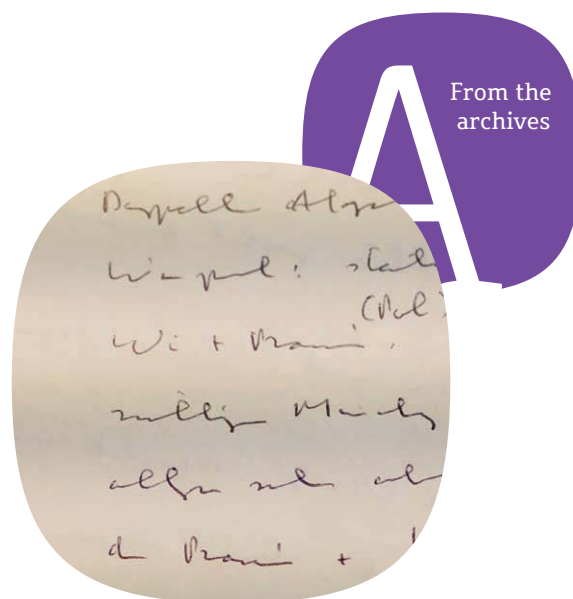
share data and analysis code – making it increasingly easy for readers to engage in do-it-yourself re-analysis. One example is the interactive re-analysis app hosted at WZB for a collective project on political information and electoral accountability (<https://wzb.eu/metaketa1>).

There have also been mixed responses among practitioners. Some organizations, such as the World Bank, UK Aid, or the International Rescue Committee have chosen to systematically put their development strategies to the test, knowing that in doing so they risk finding evidence that efforts in some areas are fruitless, but hopeful that questioning preferred practices can help. In some cases agencies have clubbed together to support groups like 3ie that seek to consolidate and communicate the evidence that exists and support research in areas where it does not.

To date however there does not seem to have been quite the same move towards this kind of questioning of practice by development organizations in the European Union where a reverence for traditional conceptions of expertise still dominates. I hope this will change and that European agencies will start taking a lead in these areas, promoting a shift away from reverence for experts – both academic and policy experts – and towards insisting on systems that lay bare the evidentiary basis for scientific and policy arguments.

In drafting this piece, I was asked to draft it like an expert, to write for a “lay audience” and “please no references, footnotes or literature.” I did as suggested, and as a result you cannot really easily verify anything I said here. There is no reason, however, in 2019, why a piece like this, even if largely read in hardcopy, could not have an electronic home with links to evidence backing every claim. Readers for our 50th anniversary Mitteilungen aren’t getting this but I expect readers for our 60th will accept nothing less.

Macartan Humphreys is director of the research unit Institutions and Political Inequality at the WZB and a professor of political science at Columbia University.



The handwriting of the WZB’s inventor

The emergence of the WZB is linked to a man who could be considered its inventor: Gerd Brand, philosopher and trained diplomat, started to lobby for his idea of a “German Science Center Berlin” in the 1960s. He would later become the first Secretary General of the WZB. Brand himself produced extensive records of the WZB’s general assemblies (like this one, taken from a November 1973 meeting in Bonn).

Protocol notes by Gerd Brand. Archive of the WZB (Photo: Martina Sander).