Expertise presents an enduring political problem. It is, on the one hand, essential to a functioning society. On the other, it is inextricably entwined with hierarchies and power disparities. A society based solely on the rule of experts would surely be no democracy. Yet neither would a society with no experts (Schudson, 2006; Turner, 2001). It is sensible to promote the spread of expertise through technological literacies and skills. However, the public will never all simply become experts—what Collins and Evans (2007) refer to as the “problem of extension.” Indeed, the empowered individual actor imagined by neoliberalism and do-it-yourself technology philosophies strains both individuals by dissolving their institutional and community support structures. We argue in this special issue that expertise and publics are mutually constitutive rather than oppositional. These essays foreground how expertise is constituted, communicated, and evaluated. The process of analyzing expertise’s roles and functions resurfaces vital concerns for the current historical moment of heated populism and social media platforms.

The question of expertise is hardly new to communication studies. Most famously, Dewey and Lippmann debated how to conceptualize the relationship between publics and expertise in a democracy. Walter Lippmann (1922) was worried about wartime era propaganda and the dawn of “public relations.” As his career progressed he saw the public as increasingly susceptible to misinformation. John Dewey (1927) responded by theorizing that publics cohere around issues of shared concern. In his view, experts were beholden to the public. A point that is often missed in the common reading of this discussion among peers (Carey, 1989) is that neither Dewey nor...
Lippmann rejected experts or publics—they simply had different ideas about the relationship between them. Other pivotal figures in communication similarly understood expertise and publics as mutually constitutive. In *The Structure and Function of Communication in Society* even Harold Lasswell, who focused on elite politics, described decisions as relying on “equivalent enlightenment between expert, leader, and layman” (p. 51).

The question of how to reconcile publics and expertise has become more urgent in an era where communication is increasingly mediated. Platforms for communication, governance, and daily life have become more technologically complex. Online platforms developed and maintained by technological experts act as unruly mediators (Gillespie, 2010). Individuals encounter information and build their identities through complex assemblages of networks, protocols, algorithms, and massive data sets (Cheney-Lippold, 2017). Much as with the informational models of control that Lippmann feared in the rise of public relations, data-driven platforms allow corporations to shape everyday communication habits. The desire to involve technological experts in addressing public problems such as these is neither new nor necessarily misguided. But as a form of power, expertise is also often unequally distributed and tends to concentrate in peoples and institutions already advantaged in other ways. Relying on experts to make political decisions is an invitation to technocracy just as allowing corporations to make them is an invitation to oligarchy. This is particularly true when publics trust technologies that experts build far more than the experts themselves. That is, publics often regard machines as ideologically neutral, making people necessarily biased (Winner, 1989).
Communication as a discipline emerged around a shared recognition that individuals were autonomous and cognitively aware. In a movement from sociology we recognized that humans were rational learners, not simply mobs easily swayed by pernicious ideologies. As such, the dominant position in communication studies in recent years has emphasized publics over experts and is often animated by ardent desires for a more just and democratic society. Theories of publics have descended from Habermas, Dewey, and Warner, among others. danah boyd’s (2010) concept of “networked publics” has driven interdisciplinary research. From cultural studies came explorations of media activism, particularly ways that young people engage politically outside of formalized electoral politics (Jenkins, Shresthova, Gamber-Thompson, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Zimmerman, 2016). Scholarship on publics has drawn attention to how individuals connect and collaborate to exert influence on powerful macro actors. Publics are clearly important and worthy of celebration. At the same time, however, hostility towards experts and disdain for their expertise is not always progressive. Populist, anti-authoritarian sentiments play a role in elections where parties appeal to an imagined average worker (Roediger, 2007). In a cruel twist of irony, the decline of public trust in the authority of expertise is linked to the rise of private technologies and authoritarian leaders who do not have public interests at heart.

The problem is that communication has gone too far in conceptualizing horizontal publics as a democratic ideal. Scholars of publics downplay the role of experts, ignoring or cloaking their necessity. Habermas, for instance, proposed standardizing and ritualizing political speech. Ideas and proposals could be judged on their inherent merits, not on how they are expressed. This seemingly solves the problem of orators swaying the public based on their rhetorical expertise, rather than their ideas. But as Fraser (1990) rejoined, using this kind of speech is in and of itself
a kind of expertise—a problem has not been dealt with but elided. Communication periodically considers how expertise is enacted or produced (Aakhus, 2001; Treem, 2012). Yet, for the most part it has discussed expertise through the language of professionalism (Carey, 1965). Communication programs have experienced healthy growth by training students to be journalists, policy makers, and data analysts. However, theorizing about how such communication professionals fit into a democratic society is surprisingly scarce. The most cynical reading of this situation is that communication programs have produced experts even as communication research denies their existence.

That technological experts are a necessity is not a new observation. Claire Nader wrote in 1965 that, “if our society is truly to benefit from scientific and technological development, we must take a closer look at the role of the technical expert.” Science and Technology Studies (STS) has more explicitly considered the political dimensions of technical expertise (Nelkin, 1975), particularly through technological activism (Dunbar-Hester, 2014). Responses from technical professions have been numerous; for example, engineering has incorporated codes of conduct and ethics training in response to activism (Wisnioski, 2012). Accordingly, many of the authors in this special issue draw on literature from STS, and do not regard occupations as mutually exclusive to progressive politics.

One of the enduring lessons of the 2016 presidential election in the United States, harkening back to the rise of fascism, is that publics can be co-opted as anti-progressive forces. Trump wielded the term “fake news” to discredit reputable news organizations. This came at a time when both publics and journalists have rightly been questioning what their role was in the world
of networked news. A persistent problem is how to verify stories that are circulated and evaluated online. In this issue, Carpenter and Kanver consider how to evaluate expertise on the social network site Facebook. Through a content analysis they found that journalists presented their affiliation, experience, and specialization through profiles. Understanding practices of technological experts as they naturally arise may provide new insights. Swist, Magee, Phuong, and Sweeting draw on Nowotny’s (2003) call for pluralistic expertise in the context of the Kolorob platform in Bangladesh. They analyze how different actors applied various forms of expertise to communicatively construct a public. A public was brought into being through the combined effort of facilitators, software developers, and geographers.

Openness is a requirement for the production and interpretation of scientific expertise. Increasingly, however, corporations also use open access to grow markets rather than simply instituting it as a neutral good (Tkacz, 2015). Scott Mitchell brings a cultural industries perspective to the Public Library of Science (PLOS). He reveals how the platform is undergirded by “dynamics and intersections between communication networks and the regulation and ownership of works through patents and property rights.” Mitchell thus draws our attention to the macro power structures undergirding scientific expertise that play out and conflict even in “open” environments.

Finally, Bassett and Archer perform a media archeology of the typewriter. They argue this mundane “technology” has been a site where tensions between publics and expertise were made visible. They draw on Nortje Marres’ (2012) theory of “material publics,” which also synthesizes Dewey and Lippmann. To Marres, the constitution of publics is a question of how technologies
mediate attention to “public problems of relevance.” Bassett and Archer reveal the relationship between touch, materialities of the keyboard, and the communities that emerge through mediated communication through a detailed historical tracing.

It is our hope that this issue reinvigorates thought and debate about the relationship between publics and expertise. We need to go beyond easy calls for radical horizontalism and easy critiques of bureaucracies. Communication has a role in this discussion that is not exactly fulfilled by political science, sociology, or STS. The authors in this issue are concerned with how technological expertise is communicated, interpreted, and distributed. Expertise, like knowledge and the role of the expert, is neither stable nor innate. Expertise must be governed, but it must also play a vital role in the constitution of publics to support their flourishing for democratic goals.

References


