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Noncredentialism

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In a recent tweet, Sociologist Paolo Gerbaudo wrote the following: *“Noncredentialism (i.e., your contribution is valuable regardless of professional credentials) is a trend far broader than the open-source movement and Wikipedia. It has turned into a “cult of the amateur” we also find behind fake news and conspiracy theories.”*

Indeed, we are witnessing a trend which is proliferating across various realms of social life. What I am referring to is the abundance of self-appointed experts and practitioners.

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society is currently coming to terms with decades of downplaying the climate change threat.

As is becoming increasingly clear, social media is rampant with echo-chambers of like-minded people who confirm and replicate their preferred theories without checking their validity or reliability elsewhere. At best, such echo-chambers are limited to communities who ghettoise themselves into social obscurity. But their impact could also spread across borders and societies, as President Trump himself showed us during his years of US presidency. He is now trying to create a social media platform, which, as the same Gerbaudo I referred to above put it, is based on a battle about 'knowledge'.

Malta is not immune to such antics. I joke to my University students that when it rains in Malta, the (self-appointed) weather and transport experts suddenly flourish on Facebook. Same can be said for all news headlines under the sun: Whether it's about the economy, justice, politics, or what have you, we have no shortage of commentators who seem to be knowledgeable about everything.

I also note that in Malta it is very easy to appoint oneself investigator, economist, journalist, psychologist, historian, judge, and jury, even if one doesn't have the credentials for such a role. You may produce some flashy comments on social media or publish your own (non-peer reviewed) book, and hey presto, you become a source of 'truth' for many, including others who replicate what you say and thus help create a public narrative. In this regard it is very telling how standards demanded from others when they make a controversial statement are sometimes exempted when they happen to suit one's particular agenda. This includes, for example, double-checking.

I for one believe that within Malta's parameters of free speech, rights should be reciprocated with responsibilities. Granted, there is no policy quick fix in this brave new world, but a deliberative and reflexive process on the matter could possibly help improve the current situation, which, to me looks like an unethical free-for-all which is acceptable as long as it sells, generates likes, or has substantial support.

At the same time, each one of us can help verify whether what we are watching, hearing or reading merits its self-proclaimed credentials.

For example, when someone boasts of being a professional in his field, this can be checked out. What qualifications does this person have? Are they from a reputable institution?

When someone comes up with a 'fantastic' theory, accusation, or revelation, this can be checked out too. For example, is the statement verified? If someone claims to be an expert, is his work peer-reviewed, or, in simple words, scrutinised by other experts in the field? For it is one thing producing what is ultimately equivalent to a rant and another thing having a piece of work which was researched according to scholarly procedures and was subjected to and passed peer-review. This is a basic starting point for scientific and scholarly work.

Sometimes, peer-review results in a study not being published because of shortcomings. Sometimes, the same study may improve following the constructive feedback of peer reviewers and subsequent revisions by the author. At the same time, the peer-review process does have its shortcomings, and it is not the first time that a study that was rejected by some peer-reviewers is
open ed acceptable by others.

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At the same time, an important challenge for scholars, scientists and experts in their respective fields is to help democratise access to knowledge. In theory, a wealth of arguments and conclusions from reliable and valid sources can help counter the flow of unverified knowledge coming from different directions in spheres such as social media.

There are some positive initiatives in this regard. For example, The Conversation is an independent news-site sourced by the academic and research communities and delivered to the public in a format which is relatively easy to understand. Articles from The Conversation frequently feature in The Malta Independent, and they can also be accessed online.

On similar lines, the University of Malta constantly produces a wealth of knowledge, and much of it is easily accessible through its Open Access Repository and communication initiatives. Dissemination of such knowledge to broader society, and in an accessible way, can help equip the public to face the issues at stake.

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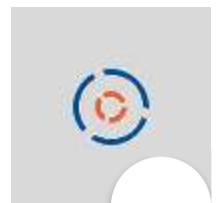


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