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Why Trust Academia? A Reflection on the Credibility of Specialists

Introduction

Leading up to the 2016 Brexit referendum, Michael Gove, the then Justice Secretary and leave campaigner, uttered probably the most infamous sentence at the time, one that reverberates today, long after 52 per cent of the votes resulted in Britain officially leaving the European Union. Appearing in a live-streamed Sky News Q&A, Gove was asked to explain why he and other high-standing Conservatives (including the current Prime Minister, Boris Johnson) were supporting the "dream" opposed by a long list of organisations and experts; to this, he said, "I think people in this country have had enough of experts."[1] The crisis of trust in experts and, by extension, in academia has been an issue long before Gove's quip; his words merely gave voice to the sentiment that nothing really distinguishes regular people from the so-called experts, whose opinions are not worth much and need not be taken into consideration when all that is needed is for "the public to trust themselves."[2] It seems that "expert," at least in Gove's and his supporters' view, no longer stands for a person with

[1] "Michael Gove – 'EU: In or out?'," *Sky News*, 3 June 2016, https://youtu.be/t8D8AoC-5i8, accessed 20 December 2020.

[2] Ibid.

knowledge and competence so specialist it is unattainable without years of study and practise, and, instead, has become a substitute for someone who abuses their authority to belittle those less privileged than them.

This paper aims to add to the discussion on the reasons and possible solutions to what I see as a crisis of trust in academia, especially along the line dividing specialists from non-specialists. It is constructed in the following way: it begins with two case studies that highlight the problem of conscious or otherwise data manipulation and the intention behind it. The texts discussed are chosen specifically due to their popularity and constant presence in the public consciousness, which seem to overshadow their serious faults. Moreover, their choice is dictated by the fact that, on their example, I present two ways in which researchers can fall prey to bias regarding their objects of research. In the second part of the article, a broader approach is adopted to the matters of ethics of research and especially the crucial issue of the awareness (or lack thereof) of self-limitations and biases of which perhaps no academic is free.

The Problem with Memory

In his 2011 book *Sapiens*, Yuval Noah Harari makes the following statement: "the new knowledge accumulated by the empires made it possible, at least in theory, to benefit the conquered populations and bring them the benefits of 'progress'—to provide them with medicine and education, to build railroads and canals, to ensure justice and prosperity."[3] Throughout the book, he is sympathetic to the struggle of the oppressed peoples but in this quote, he reiterates the point he makes sometime earlier that certain fruits of imperial exploitation are overall positive, and—in some sense—worth the sacrifices.

Having researched the less apparent consequences of the imperial project, I found this line of argument quite problematic. However—and this information is crucial for the purposes of this paper—the first time I acquainted myself with the contents of *Sapiens*, I did not actually read it; I listened to its audio version available on Audible. Reading a book and listening to a book are two distinct experiences and perhaps the retention of the subject matter may be better when all of the focus is on the act of reading. Listening to audiobooks, at least in my case, tends to accompany

[3] Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (London: Vintage, 2015), p. 336.

other activities, such as driving or doing chores. It may be one explanation why, upon the initial listen, I was left with the impression that Harari was practically praising rail tracks as one of the few achievements of imperialism that were unequivocally positive. I remember this distinctly because I made a mental note to confront this view with an article by Sheldon Watts I had read some years before, belying the claim and presenting in no uncertain terms the unfortunate consequences the building of the railway network in India proved to have. In it, Watts shows the relation between the British-imposed operations and malaria, and paints a very vivid and tragic picture of the real cost of progress:

> [Contemporary defenders of empire] consistently downplay the role of the development practices that accompanied empire and which had a massively detrimental impact on the health and well-being of imperialized people. This was particularly true in the case of India. There, the British quest for profit on investment returns combined with British inability to adopt a holistic approach to the needs of Indian agriculturalists (90 per cent of the population) and also British failure to apply the scientific findings of one of their own people—Ronald Ross—led to unacceptably high levels of mortality and morbidity from malaria.[4]

Before the implementation of "progress," the spread of malaria was contained to places of specific, mosquito-friendly conditions. However, once the grand plans were transformed into grand deeds, intrusion into the tissue of the land and the removal of natural barriers meant tipping the climactic equilibrium and, in a way, spilling the infection out. Of the impact of laying the railway system and its relation to the increased infection rates, Watts notes that "[r]ailways and roads had an active role in creating breeding places for malarial mosquitoes through the building of railway and road embankments, taking no heed of streams and natural drainage flows, causing flooding; and through the digging of pits for gravel which then filled with water."[5] In the case of the Indian railway network, "progress" and the accompanying profits were achieved through means

[4] Sheldon Watts, "British Development Policies and Malaria in India 1897–c. 1929," *Past & Present*, No. 165 (1999), p. 148.

[5] Watts, "British Development Policies and Malaria in India," p. 150, n. 23.

that, by solving one problem (lack of transportation), created a much greater one.

This discrepancy between Harari's and Watts's arguments proves an interesting point in the discussion on the general issue of trust in authorities. Harari (who is himself a distinguished academic with PhD in History earned at the Oxford University) wrote a book addressed to the general reader, spanning thousands of years on mere (considering) 500 pages, so certain simplifications and generalisations are not only expected but required in this case. Non-specialists do not need to know the intricacies of particular regimes to appreciate the general trends and processes presented in this book; it is subtitled *A Brief History of Humankind*, after all. Notwithstanding, calling railways an unequivocally positive result of the imperial process cannot be accepted. This issue must necessarily be addressed because the general reader does not have the expertise to realise that this is by no means a definite truth but a highly contested assertion. And, if Harari has decided to generalise this and omit that, what else is there to be discovered as a half-truth, manipulation or simply lack of expertise in a particular field? This is not merely a self-serving contest in which my knowledge is proven superior to that possessed by a bestselling author; this is a question of truth and trust. If one were so inclined, one could almost imagine it as a call of duty of every specialist: to go forth and dispel misinformation for the greater good of all, *especially* non-specialists.

Disregarding this obvious virtue-signalling, the problem of how much any of us (specialist or not) can trust (if at all) Harari is not something to be disregarded. In fact, issues raised in and by *Sapiens* have already been addressed by scientists in their respective fields. For instance, Alice Roberts, British anthropologist, in a conversation with comedian Richard Herring, said the following about Harari's work: "I just find it a bit disappointing. [It's] one of these books with a kind of big thesis but [...] when you actually look at the foundation of it, [it] seems a bit shaky. And a lot of the paleoanthropology is about 30 years out of date."[6] Her voice is by no means isolated; many other specialists, such as anthropologist Craig

[6] Alice Roberts in conversation with Richard Herring, "RHLSTP #220: Professor Alice Roberts—What Would You Keep in Your Marsupial Pouch?," *Richard Herring's Leicester Square Theatre Podcast*, 17 July 2019, accessed 25 November 2020, https://www.comedy.co.uk/podcasts/richard_herring_lst_podcast/rhlstp_220_alice_roberts/.

T. Palmer[7] and chemist Brittland DeKorver,[8] also criticised some aspects of the book.

Therefore, following my subject matter knowledge, I wanted to add to the righteous criticism of *Sapiens* myself. However, a problem arose when I actually began to search for the relevant passage in the book which I was supposed to critique. Nowhere in *Sapiens* is there a sentence even remotely similar to what I distinctly remembered as "Not all effects of imperialism are as uncontroversial as railroads." Instead, there are two less straightforward and unequivocal excerpts expressing this sentiment, the one quoted at the beginning of this section and the following one:

> Nevertheless, the modern Indian state is a child of the British Empire. The British killed, injured and persecuted the inhabitants of the subcontinent, but they also united a bewildering mosaic of warring kingdoms, principalities and tribes, creating a shared national consciousness and a country that functioned more or less as a single political unit. They laid the foundations of the Indian judicial system, created its administrative structure, and built the railroad network that was critical for economic integration. Independent India adopted Western democracy, in its British incarnation, as its form of government. English is still the subcontinent's lingua franca, a neutral tongue that native speakers of Hindi, Tamil and Malayalam can use to communicate. Indians are passionate cricket players and chai (tea) drinkers, and both game and beverage are British legacies.[9]

Railroads are mentioned in passing as problematic benefits and legacies of imperial progress, not, as I incorrectly remembered, as emblems of

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[7] "[I]nstead of being content with the legitimate enterprise of passing moral judgments on behaviors, Harari mixes those judgments with discussions of the evolutionary processes in a way that may lead readers to conflate evolutionary explanation and moral justification, potentially undoing a distinction evolutionary theorists have struggled so hard to establish." Craig T. Palmer, Review of "Harari, Yuval Noah. 2015. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*," *Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2017), p. 237. Overall, however, Palmer's review is positive: "highly thought-provoking and well worth reading." (p. 242)

[8] "[Harari] contrasted the ancient remedy for chapped hands—rubbing them with olive oil—to the modern solution that the scientific revolution has provided us, listing the chemical names for the ingredients in hand cream. However, the first five ingredients listed after water are present in olive oil! This type of rhetoric only serves to promote chemophobia and mistrust of science, and seems more appropriate for a blog touting the latest 'natural' remedy for measles." Brittland DeKorver, "Book and Media Recommendations: What If?; The Lifecycle of Software Objects; Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind; and Gulp: Adventures on the Alimentary Canal," *Journal of Chemical Education*, Vol. 92, No. 7 (2015), p. 1144. DOI: 10.1021/acs.jchemed.5b00235.

[9] Harari, *Sapiens*, p. 228.

uncontroversial, exclusively positive achievements of human endeavour. Harari never said it, but my impression that he meant it could have very well led to my misrepresenting his words only slightly to drive my point across better. This situation exemplifies the problem familiar to any academic: how much of our personal bias is acknowledged when reproducing another author's words—especially if we disagree with them. I could have very slightly manipulated Harari's overtone in the choice of my quotations to serve my purpose in two sets of circumstances: either subconsciously, in good faith, genuinely believing that he was indeed giving too much praise to the not-that-worthy cause, or—consciously and with intent—despite realising my prejudice, following through for the higher purpose of proving him wrong.

Of course, such landmines are part and parcel of the work of an academic and as such, not exactly worthy of an extended discussion. Within the pressures of the "publish or perish" reality, misrepresentations, misquotations, or simply sloppy research are appreciated as inevitable by-products of less-than-ideal working conditions. These shortcomings, hopefully, will have been caught by the filters of peer review. However, the ease with which manipulation of this kind may happen (and, I am sure, happens all the time) suggests that some of such works will sneak through. And this I would identify as the first instance of the source of mistrust in the academia.

The Problem of Agenda

Manipulating data (consciously or not) to serve one's agenda has a long, shameful history. In his (non-academic) bestseller, *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*, Jon Ronson gives the example of Gustave Le Bon, famous for his research on the psychology of the crowd. Drawing from the few sources existing on Le Bon's life and career, namely his 1975 biography written by Robert A. Nye, *The Origins of Crowd Psychology*, and his conversation with its author, Ronson paints a picture of a provincial racist and misogynist (or, as his biographer calls him, "the biggest asshole in the whole of creation"[10]) with an inferiority complex, who vows to make a name for himself by any means possible. As Ronson explains, although

[10] Robert ('Bob') Nye in conversation with Jon Ronson in: Jon Ronson, *So You've Been Publicly Shamed* (London: Picador, 2016), p. 91.

shunned by the intellectual elite of Paris, Le Bon had the ambition to join its ranks by explaining to them, still recovering from the social unrest of 1871, the insanity of people in crowds. Having measured the volume of various human skulls (using buckwheat grains), he presented a paper in which he concluded—I am simplifying here—that only men like himself were of superior intellectual quality.[11] Le Bon does not come across as a particularly sympathetic character. As for the accusations of misogyny, I think it is best to let Le Bon explain himself; the following is a full and unabridged paragraph from the paper on brain volume that Ronson also quotes:

> This is not the place, in a Paper solely dedicated to the demonstration of anatomical facts, to investigate whether the inferiority of the female skull, principally in the higher races, is accompanied by a corresponding intellectual inferiority. I shall therefore restrict myself to responding to this question in a few words. This inferiority is too evident to be contested for an instant, and one can hardly discuss the matter but as to its degree. All psychologists who have studied the intelligence of women acknowledge today that, except for the poets or romance writers, they represent the lowest forms of human evolution and are much nearer to savages and children than to the civilized adult male. They are primarily characterized by instability, fickleness, absence of reflection and logic, incapacity to reason or giving way to improvident reasons, and the propensity of having only the instinct of the moment as their guide. Additionally, one will not be able to cite in the sciences which require reasoning a single remarkable work produced by a woman, and yet a great many have received a scientific education. In America alone 600 practice medicine. It is only in certain arts in which women exert themselves in an unconscious way, like music, singing, poetry, etc., areas where perhaps primitive peoples and savages excel, that one observes them at very rare intervals distinguish themselves.[12]

One cannot help but sympathise with Nye's remark. There is, therefore, little surprise in learning that the reaction of Le Bon's peers was similar: his conclusions were met with derision. Humiliated, he left Paris for Arabia,

[11] Ibid., p. 90.

[12] Gustave Le Bon, "Anatomical and Mathematical Researches into the Laws of the Variations of Brain Volume and their Relation to Intelligence," trans. Robert K. Stevenson, *Revue d'Anthropologie*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1879), pp. 45–6.

where he continued to produce more works, but this time unencumbered by evidence.[13] This should have been the end of Le Bon but, somehow, his return in 1895 with *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* was a triumph. His explanation of the madness of the masses was generally accepted and has enjoyed a renowned place in the popular imagination to this day, despite the fact that such prominent figures as Mussolini and Goebbels publicly praised his works.[14]

However, as it is with many other influential works, only a small percentage of it is actually known, and the rest is forgotten. Which is a shame because, if we *did* refer to Le Bon's opus in its entirety, he hopefully would have been consigned to the rightfully deserved limbo of "cancel culture." As Clifford Stott and John Drury note, Le Bon "stands in a long line of French right-wing racist and anti-Semitic intellectuals [...] [being] an ardent supporter of social hierarchy [who] committed himself to an attack on all forms of egalitarianism, not only socialism but also democracy."[15] It is one thing, however, to read about his views in a pop-psychology book such as Ronson's or a specialist article addressed and accessible to the expert reader, and another to find the controversies in the original. The following is what Le Bon says about the reasons for "inferior" psychology of the crowd, very much echoing his views from 17 years before:

> It will be remarked that among the special characteristics of crowds there are several—such as impulsiveness, irritability, incapacity to reason, the absence of judgment and of the critical spirit, the exaggeration of the sentiments, and others besides—which are almost always observed in beings belonging to inferior forms of evolution—in women, savages, and children, for instance.[16]

I am by no means an expert in evolutionary biology but even to my non-specialist knowledge, "women, savages, and children" are no different species from men such as Le Bon, and so their evolutionary stage is the same; there is no *biological* reason to consider them inferior—but there is a cultural one. Le Bon's prejudice clouds his research. While the racist

[13] Ronson, *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*, p. 91.

[14] Ibid., p. 93.

[15] Clifford Stott and John Drury, "Contemporary Understanding of Riots: Classical Crowd Psychology, Ideology and the Social Identity Approach," *Public Understanding of Science*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2017), p. 8.

[16] Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (New York: The Macmillan Co. 1896), pp. 16–17.

hierarchy of people he uses may—in a very convoluted way—explain why "savages" are, according to Le Bon, an inferior form of evolution, there is no logic or reason why women and children would be considered in this category as well. How can Le Bon, birthed by a woman and a former child himself, seriously hold such a ridiculous view? If he genuinely does, he is a poor scientist; if he does not, but maintains that nonetheless, he is an unethical pseudo-scientist. And, to add insult to injury, he was also a blatant plagiarist,[17] having "borrowed" ideas and sometimes full sentences form the authors studying the subject of crowd psychology years before him to such an extent that one of the injured researchers called it "piracy [...] utmost of its kind."[18]

The Problem of Trust

The example of my misremembering parts of *Sapiens* shows how easy it is to mislead the reader, even if subconsciously. The example of Le Bon adds another two layers of mistrust one can experience when presented with his life work: the story of his unsuccessful early career and his "revenge" study is filtered first through Nye's biography and then through Jon Ronson's retelling of it to his (non-specialist) readers. Nye's 45-year-old *The Origins of Crowd Psychology* is not readily available (it has been out of print for some time; there are only a few copies available in libraries and there is no e-book), and Ronson largely relies on his telephone conversation with the biographer to sketch Le Bon's profile—an option not available to anyone. Whereas one's words could very well be taken to speak for themselves, one's life story is another matter: creating a coherent narrative from scraps of writing, other people's opinions, professional achievements and media messages is a process of compilation and selection, with the final effect never a full picture. Nye told Ronson that he was not a fan of his subject, and this too could have shaped his selection process. Ronson and his editors also reshaped the same story to fit better with the message of *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*. Before anyone can untangle this thick layering, the suspicion of the source can already arise.

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[17] Stott and Drury, "Contemporary Understanding of Riots," p. 8; Jaap Van Ginneken, "The 1985 Debate on the Origins of Crowd Psychology," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, Vol. 21 (1985), pp. 375–382.

[18] Scipio Sighele, quoted in: Jaap Van Ginneken, "The 1985 Debate on the Origins of Crowd Psychology," p. 375.

Misremembering, biased selection, and editing to match the needs of specific readership are just three sources of mistrust out of many more. In their book devoted to the issues of trust in media and journalism, Kim Otto and Andreas Köhler describe—after Lucassen and Schraagen—the four interconnected layers of trust in the media, depicted as concentric circles, at the core of which lies trust in the message, outside of which are, respectively, trust in the source and trust in the medium, while general disposition to trust is the outermost circle.[19] Academia performs a different function in society than media and journalists, but the issues of trust in this particular division appear analogous. In theory, academics have more power than journalists because the former have the expertise to generate new content that journalists report on. As the clichéd saying goes, with great power comes great responsibility. As from media, we expect impartiality from researchers presenting their findings and mistrust in both these communicators appears equally strong. However, the ideological bias of certain media outlets is commonly known; right- or left-leaning newspapers and TV channels and are easily identifiable as such, and thus, attract the consumers of aligning views. The political alignment of individual scholars, departments or even universities is a much more complicated issue.

Again, in theory, it should not matter which party or ideological viewpoint a publishing scholar supports; points trump politics. Except it seems that this line becomes blurred, and ideological bias seeps into research. In November 2020, Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education granted almost two million zlotys for the translation of *Powszechna Encyklopedia Filozofii* (*Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*) published by John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, in order to fight "leftist-liberal dictatorship at universities."[20] It would be naive to expect progressive and liberal stance from the authors of the entries; they, as their affiliated institution, identify with the right-wing, Catholic-conservative views to which, as any other institution, they are entitled.

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[19] Kim Otto and Andreas Köhler, Introduction to *Trust in Media and Journalism*, eds. Kim Otto and Andreas Köhler (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2018) pp. 5–6.

[20] Piotr Osęka, "Co kryje Powszechna Encyklopedia Filozofii, na której tłumaczenie Czarnek dał prawie dwa miliony?" *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 18 November 2020, accessed 28 November 2020, https://wyborcza.pl/7,75968,26518988,co-kryje-powszechna-encyklopedia-filozofii-na-ktorej-tlumaczenie.html.

The question arising here is whether this alignment impacts their output; the answer can be found in the entries of the encyclopaedia. A good example of bias is present in the "tolerance" entry, which its author, Piotr Jaroszyński, includes on his webpage.[21] According to Jaroszyński, "tolerance" is "the lack of discrimination based on one's own or socially accepted views, opinions and attitudes mostly in spheres such as religion, nationality, race, and contemporarily also 'sexual orientation'."[22] That Jaroszyński puts the final phrase in inverted commas is no accident; it is so because it "belongs to the canon of ethical categories promoted by social liberalism (*ideologia socliberalna*); it also constitutes an integral part of the so-called political correctness."[23] Interestingly, in this case, political correctness does not deserve its inverted commas; Jaroszyński reserves these for sexualities. As stated before, such a view is in no way surprising and might be expected. What is of particular concern, however, is the paragraph in the final part of the 9-page-long definition:

> The word 'tolerance' allows for muddying (*zaciemnianie*) or manipulating of the sense of human and social relations. Transplanted from the sphere of religion [...] to the sphere of world view and politics [...], it becomes a tool of ideological war. Such laws which are justified because they are based on the real differentiation between good and evil, which relate to human subjectivity and dignity, and which protect against discrimination due to racial or ethnic reasons are being confused with pseudo-laws of 'sexual minorities' or are being restrictive for right-wing views.[24]

Sexual orientation and sexual minorities are to Jaroszyński nothing more than pseudo-categories whose sole purpose is to demand pseudo-laws (whatever that means) for pseudo-people. There is something equally terrifying and ridiculous in the pseudo-scholarly kinship between Le Bon

[21] Piotr Jaroszyński, "Tolerancja," *Hasła w Powszechnej Encyklopedii Filozofii*, Tom X (2008), accessed 25 November 2020, https://www.kul.pl/art_6358.html.

[22] The original quote goes as follows: "niedyskryminowanie z powodu odmiennych od własnych lub społecznie uznanych poglądów, ocen czy postaw głównie w takich sferach, jak religia, narodowość, rasa, a współcześnie również 'orientacja seksualna'." Ibid., p. 1.

[23] "[N]ależy do kanonu kategorii etycznych promowanych przez ideologię socliberalną, stanowi również integralną część tzw. politycznej poprawności" Ibid.

[24] "Słuszne, bo oparte na realnym rozróżnieniu dobra i zła, odnoszące się do ludzkiej podmiotowości i godności, prawa chroniące przed dyskryminacją z powodów rasowych lub etnicznych mieszane są z pseudoprawami 'mniejszości seksualnych' lub ograniczane dla poglądów prawicowych." Ibid., p. 8.

and Jaroszyński; in both cases, the same kind of logical acrobatics are needed to distinguish between evolutionarily superior men and inferior women and to demand, in the same sentence, subjectivity and dignity for human beings and deny it to minorities. Perhaps Michael Gove had this type of "expertise" in mind when he noted that people had had enough.

Where Are We Now?

These ways of misrepresenting data to serve a particular purpose, which undermine the trust non-specialists may have in academics, are by no means new. In themselves, therefore, they do not explain the present crisis of trust in the academia. The current system of knowledge distribution: trickling down from research centres to (preferably) indexed and impact-factor-assessed journals, and then siphoned via popular science channels (including shows on traditional and user-generated video platforms, audio programmes, print and digital media etc.) to content consumers, does not instil confidence in the process. In addition, anecdotally, we can recall a news snippet beginning with something akin to "Scientists from X university gave helium to alligators and made them sing,"[25] which, instead of boosting the interest in scientific endeavours, builds a picture of scientific research as something frivolous and irrelevant. Furthermore, popularising efforts of scientists trying to bring their subjects closer to the lay audience may have created an illusion that all these complex areas of research are available to everyone. If we add to that the rivalry of countless (less or more credible) content creators fighting for people's hearts and minds (and wallets), this all paints a vision of a vast and overwhelming network of information, which is extremely difficult to navigate.

To say that academia is experiencing a crisis in trust is an understatement. What this paper offers by way of conclusion is a suggestion of solution or reasons to be optimistic. Two works discussed in the first part of this paper, Harari's *Sapiens* and Ronson's *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*, have both proven very popular among general readers, and thus,

[25] This particular example is taken from the Ig Nobel Prize Website. In 2020, Stephan Reber, Takeshi Nishimura, Judith Janisch, Mark Robertson, and Tecumseh Fitch were awarded the prize in acoustic "for inducing a female Chinese alligator to bellow in an airtight chamber filled with helium-enriched air." Their research was published in 2015 in the *Journal of Experimental Biology* and is available in full at: https://jeb.biologists.org/content/218/15/2442.full. Ig Nobel prizes are awarded, "[f]or achievements that first make people LAUGH then make them THINK." *Improbable Research* website, accessed 25 November 2020, https://www.improbable.com/ig-about/winners/.

have acquainted a large number of people with subjects they may not have encountered beforehand or such which they knew only very little about. Le Bon-inspired ideas of mob mentality are still casually mentioned in media, for instance during social unrests such as 2011 London riots or 2020 BLM protests,[26] so it is quite important that his "scientific methods" are brought to light. Apart from popular acclaim, *Sapiens* has also generated a robust response from specialists, listing its shortcomings point by point. The contents of *Powszechna Encyklopedia Filozofii* have inspired critique in a daily newspaper, and it will surely be picked up and examined in the academic circles of more catholic interests.

Fortunately for all of us, academia has a tool with which it can self-regulate: peer review, a process in which one's research undergoes a thorough examination, not just before the moment of publication but also *afterwards*. By either putting one's work through the popcultural filter so that it is accessible to non-specialists (the Harari way), or intentionally choosing controversial or just *wacky* subjects (alligators singing on helium), scientists can not only reach a wider audience but, crucially, *each other.* This is because, I believe, popularising the work of a specialist does not dilute its impact but rather broadens the pool of peers: a work which goes "viral" is put through the news "wringer"; as its range increases, it can reach the general public as well as specialists, who can react and offer their opinions on the matter. The self-regulating academia filters itself through popculture and back into the specialist channels, only to repeat the process; in this way, the second stage of peer review never ends: it can revise not just contemporary works but also those dating back even centuries. To answer the question in the title of this article: we are not supposed to trust individual academics who, as I think I managed to demonstrate, are fallible and biased; we are supposed to trust in the *process*. In the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, when our future depends on our trust in academia, we (specialists and non-specialists alike) cannot afford any more scepticism. Academic works should be considered common good and treated as such because their distribution and circulation allow for the never-ending process of highlighting worthy and weeding out unworthy content.

[26] Dan Hancocks, "The Power of Crowds," *The Guardian*, 2 July 2020, accessed 18 January 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2020/jun/02/the-power-of-crowds.

Justyna Jajszczok

Why Trust Academia?—A Reflection on the Credibility of Specialists

Using examples from popular culture and history, the author speculates on the reasons and possible solutions to the crisis of trust in academia, especially along the line dividing specialists from non-specialists. The article begins with two case studies (of Yuval Noah Harari and Gustave Le Bon) that highlight the problem of conscious or otherwise data manipulation and the intention behind it. In the second part of the article, a broader approach is adopted to the matters of ethics of research and especially the crucial issue of the awareness (or lack thereof) of self-limitations and biases of which perhaps no academic is free. The article ends with the assertion that rather than individual researchers, we should trust in the academic process of the never-ending peer review.

Keywords: Academia, Yuval Noah Harari, Gustave Le Bon, Jon Ronson, trust
Słowa klucze: Akademia, Yuval Noah Harari, Gustave Le Bon, Jon Ronson, zaufanie