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Shopping for Experts

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ABSTRACT. This paper explores the socio-epistemic practice of shopping for experts. I argue that expert shopping is particularly likely to occur on what Thi Nguyen calls cognitive islands (i.e., a domain that is both subtle and isolated). To support my claim, I focus on the case of macroeconomics. First, I make a *prima-facie* case for thinking that macroeconomics is a cognitive island. I, then, argue that ordinary people are particularly likely to engage in expert shopping when it comes to macroeconomic matters. I go on to distinguish two kinds of expert shopping, which I call cynical and wishful expert shopping, and introduce the notion of assisted expert shopping, which occurs when people or organizations shop for experts on behalf of other people. I argue that assisted expert shopping can consist of a particularly worrisome combination of cynical and wishful expert shopping, which sometimes result in what I call a propagandistic use of expertise. Finally, I critically examine some possible reasons for optimism and find them wanting. I conclude by suggesting that that much of what I said about shopping for macroeconomic experts might also apply *mutatis mutandis* to other policy-relevant domains of expertise.

1. INTRODUCTION

The 2007–2008 Financial Crisis took most people by surprise. In its aftermath, many blamed economists, policymakers, and regulators for failing to foresee the looming financial catastrophe. While a handful of economists had been warning about an impending crisis,[1] their warnings were largely dismissed by the rest of the profession and unheeded by policymakers and regulators. Some even argued that economists, policymakers, and regulators had contributed to the Financial Crisis. Critics argued that the depth and breadth of the Financial Crisis was partly the result of the deregulation of the financial sector, which culminated in 1999 with the repeal by Congress of key provisions of the Banking Act of 1933 (colloquially known as the Glass-Steagall Act). Notably, some of the critics were members in good standing of the economic profession. They even included prominent economists, such as the Nobel Prize winner Paul Krugman, who published a highly critical opinion piece in the *New York Times* under the telling title 'How Did Economists Get It So Wrong?' (Krugman 2009). Among Krugman's allegations was that 'the belief in efficient financial markets

[1] See, e.g., (Rajan 2006)). For a review, see (Bezemer 2009).

blinded many if not most economists to the emergence of the biggest financial bubble in history' (Krugman 2009).

Some fellow economists did not take kindly to Krugman's criticisms. John H. Cochrane, a leading financial economist at the University of Chicago, responded with an essay entitled 'How did Paul Krugman Get It So Wrong?' in which he stated that Krugman had 'no interesting ideas whatsoever about what caused the financial and economic problems that culminated in the crash of 2008, what policies might have prevented it, or what might help us in the future' (Cochrane 2011, 36). More specifically, Cochrane argued that Krugman's criticisms betrayed a profound misunderstanding of the efficient market hypothesis, which entails that no one (including economists and policymakers) can reliably predict where the market is going.

When two of the foremost economists in the world disagree so vehemently and publicly, who should ordinary people believe? Did the deregulation of the banking sector contribute to the crisis? Was the deregulation of the banking sector inspired by an excessive faith in the self-regulatory powers of markets? And was this (alleged) faith based on the so-called efficient market hypothesis? These questions seem to be particularly important given that this debate is not merely a retrospective blame game. In 2010, the US congress passed the Dodd–Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act (colloquially known as Dodd-Frank) in an attempt to regulate the financial sector more effectively and prevent a repeat of the Financial Crisis. Unsurprisingly, the two sides of the debate over the causes of the Financial Crisis have also diametrically opposed views about the merits and demerits of Dodd-Frank. To put it in a nutshell, one side considers Dodd-Frank a step in the right direction, while the other sees it as costly and ineffective red tape that interferes with the efficient functioning of markets. Should citizens vote for politicians who support Dodd-Frank or for those who vow to repeal it?

Unfortunately, it is very difficult for ordinary citizens to figure out the answers to these questions amidst the cacophony of the public political/policy debate. But why is this so? One possible answer is that macroeconomics (broadly construed) is what Thi Nguyen calls a cognitive island (Nguyen 2020b). According to Nguyen, a *cognitive island* is a domain of expertise that is both subtle and isolated. A domain of expertise is *subtle* to the extent to which it produces results that can only be directly assessed by genuine experts. Weather forecasting might be a good example of a domain of expertise that is not particularly subtle. To some degree, we can all directly verify the accuracy of yesterday's local weather forecast by checking today's weather.[2] Nuclear physics, on the other hand, is a subtle domain. Usually, the claims of nuclear physics cannot be directly verified (or, often, even interpreted) by ordinary people. For example, a nuclear physicist's claim that Uranuim-235 has a half-life of 703.8 million years cannot be directly verified by anyone who is not themselves a nuclear physicist (in fact, it cannot be directly verified by any individual person for that matter).[3] A subtle domain (such as nuclear physics), however, need not be a cognitive island because not all subtle domains are isolated. A domain of expertise is *isolated* to the extent to which it is not "linked" to other, less subtle domains. For example, even if nuclear physics is a subtle domain, it is "linked" to nuclear engineering, which is much less subtle. For one thing, nuclear engineers have relied on the expertise of nuclear physicists in designing nuclear bombs, which, as we unfortunately know, work all too well. The (relatively) unsubtle expertise of nuclear engineers, thus, can serve to legitimize the subtle expertise of nuclear physicists in the eyes of the general public.

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[2] I should note that this remark is likely to apply only to non-technical, categorical forecasts (e.g., 'Temperatures will drop significantly tomorrow') and not to probabilistic or technical forecasts (e.g., 'There is a 70% chance of rain tomorrow', or 'The effects of the cold front will last through the weekend').

[3] Of course, ordinary citizens might be able to *indirectly* corroborate the claim by asking a friend who knows enough about nuclear physics or by searching for the half-life of Uranium-235 on the internet, but neither of those count as *direct* verifications.

In this paper, I first make a *prima-facie* case for thinking that macroeconomics (broadly construed) is a cognitive island (§2) and then focus on some of the social-epistemological consequences of its cognitive island status. In particular, in §3, I argue that ordinary people are particularly likely to engage in expert shopping on a cognitive island and then I distinguish between two different kinds of expert shopping, which I call cynical and wishful expert shopping. In §4, I introduce the notion of assisted expert shopping and argue that assisted expert shopping can sometime result in a propagandistic use of expertise. In §5, I critically examine two factors that might mitigate the risks of expert shopping and, in §6, I discuss an alternative interpretation of the phenomenon of expert shopping in the political domain.

Before proceeding, let me mention three terminological conventions I adopt in this paper. The first is that I use 'macroeconomics' both broadly (as opposed to narrowly) and strictly (as opposed to loosely). I use it *broadly* because I take macroeconomics to include all economics that is relevant to public policy. While this use of 'macroeconomics' is broader than its standard use, it is less cumbersome than repeatedly using phrases such as 'economics that is relevant to public policy.' I use it *strictly* because I take macroeconomics to be an academic discipline that is a branch of economics and not just a collection of pieces of folk wisdom about the economy (e.g., 'low interest rates stimulate spending and investment').

The second convention is that, in what follows, unless otherwise noted, I use 'expert' to mean someone who is regarded by some people as a genuine expert on a certain topic (irrespectively of whether or not they are in fact a genuine expert on that topic). As I use the term, 'expert' should be understood as shorthand for 'presumed expert' or, even better, 'person who is regarded as a genuine expert by some people.' On this use, (presumed) experts include both *semi-experts* (i.e., people who are more competent in a domain than the median person but are not full experts) and *pseudo-experts* (i.e., people who are regarded as genuine experts by some but, in fact, are not).[4] I should note that this is merely a terminological convention adopted to avoid the repeated use of unwieldy expressions and it should not be interpreted as an endorsement of a reputational account of expertise (i.e., an account of expertise according to which all it takes to be an expert is to be regarded as one by some people) (for the distinction between reputational and objective accounts of expertise, see, e.g., (Watson 2021, chap. 6)). To the contrary, I assume that there is an objective distinction between genuine experts, and both semi-experts and pseudo-experts (although for the sake of generality I so not presuppose a specific objective account of expertise).[5]

The third convention is that 'the expert's opinion(s)' refers to the opinion(s) professed by the expert (before the relevant audience), which are not necessarily identical with the expert's actual opinion(s) (i.e., what the expert actually believes in their heart of hearts). So, for example, an expert witness might be willing to testify in bad faith to something that they do not believe to be true for financial gain. While they do not really believe the content of their own testimony, their testimony is what counts as their opinion as far as the jurors (and we) are concerned.

[4] For our purposes, the following rough-and-ready characterization of levels of economic expertise will suffice. A genuine economic expert is someone who holds a postgraduate degree in economics. A semi-expert in economics is someone who has taken some university-level courses in economics. A pseudo-expert is someone who has relatively superficial knowledge of economics but acts as if they are a genuine expert or a pseudo-expert. And, finally, those whom I refer to as 'ordinary people' have no expertise at all in macroeconomics (understood both broadly and strictly) (i.e., they have never taken an economics course, read an economics textbook, etc.).

[5] For an overview of different accounts of expertise, see (Watson 2021)).

2. IS MACROECONOMICS A COGNITIVE ISLAND?

In this section, I make a *prima-facie* case for thinking that macroeconomics is a cognitive island.[6] In order for macroeconomics to be a cognitive island, it has to be both subtle and isolated. Let me make a case for each of these claims in turn. The claim that macroeconomics is a subtle domain is, I suspect, not particularly controversial. Macroeconomics produces very few results that can be directly checked by people who are not genuine experts in economics. While economists sometimes make predictions about the economy that are seemingly straightforward, often these predictions are too vague to even count as proper predictions (think of newspaper headlines such 'Economists warn of excessively high levels of household debt' or 'The economy is on the path to recovery, economists say'). Even when the claims of economists are more specific (e.g., 'Core inflation will rise to 2% next year'), they cannot be directly verified by the public. First, members of the public cannot directly observe changes in macroeconomic indicators such as core inflation—they must rely on economists' estimates of them and, often, these estimates depend on assumptions that are subtle and not entirely uncontroversial.[7] Second, economists' predictions about the economy have to be understood as being prefixed by an implicit *ceteris paribus* clause—the prediction is that, *everything else being equal*, core inflation will rise to 2% next year. But, in an economy, everything else is rarely equal. Monetary authorities might raise the interest rate, fiscal authorities might make changes to the tax code, wars might cause supply shocks in key markets, new technologies might disrupt old industries or create new ones, etc. Third, the very act of predicting that inflation will rise might itself contribute to rising inflation if enough people believe the prediction and revise their inflation expectations accordingly. Finally, as we have seen in the previous section, even genuine experts cannot agree on the truth or falsity of many of their factual claims even after the fact (e.g., 'Deregulation was one of the causes of the Financial Crisis'). How can regular people be expected to adjudicate the disagreements among them?

The claim that macroeconomics is isolated, however, might seem more controversial. As far as I can see, the most plausible argument against it is that monetary authorities rely on the expertise of economists in their monetary policy decisions and that monetary policy is largely successful. However, neither of these premises is uncontroversial. The first premise (i.e., that monetary authorities rely on macroeconomics) might seem to be relatively uncontentious. After all, monetary authorities typically rely on macroeconomic theory and on some of the most sophisticated macroeconomics models available in making their decisions (see, e.g., (Del Negro et al. 2013)). However, it is also true that monetary policy is (literally) not rocket science. Aerospace engineers must rely on physical theories to launch rockets into space, but it is unclear how much central bankers actually rely on the insight provided by macroeconomics theories and models and how much they rely on some combination of intuitions, good sense, and trial-and-error.[8] To use an analogy that is often used by economists and central bankers, monetary policy is more like driving a car than to launching a rocket.[9] The second premise (i.e., that monetary policy is largely successful) is, if anything, even more questionable. The premise might have enjoyed a higher level of credibility before the Great Recession, when many were celebrating the advent of the so-called Great Moderation, a period of macroeconomic stability that, in the United States, extended from the mid-1980s to the start of the crisis, and which, according to

[6] While Nguyen does speculate that macroeconomics might be a cognitive island (Nguyen 2020b, 2808), he does not argue for that claim.

[7] Estimates of core inflation, for example, are based on the Consumer Price Index (CPI), which is the calculated average of prices of a basket of goods. The CPI, thus, depends on both the composition of the basket as well as on the weights assigned to different goods.

[8] See, e.g., (Blanchard 2007).

[9] The car driving analogy is often used by central bankers and economists to explain monetary policy to the general public (see, e.g., (Beckworth 2017)).

some proponents, was partly the result of advances in macroeconomics.[10] However, in the wake of the Great Recession, these celebrations might seem to have been premature.[11] More importantly, even before the Financial Crisis rocked the world economy, the proponents of the Great Moderation conceded that it was unclear how much of the decreased macroeconomic volatility could be attributed to advances in macroeconomics and how much of it was due to sheer good luck.[12] Finally (and most importantly), even if both these premises are true, that would still not be enough to rescue macroeconomics from isolation. Even admitting (if only for the sake of the argument) that monetary policy is, indeed, largely successful and that its success is partly due to the success of macroeconomics, ordinary people would need to know both premises to be true in order for macroeconomics not to be isolated. However, it is difficult to see how we can expect ordinary people to know both premises are true when even the experts are not entirely sure to what extent the (presumed) success of monetary policy can be ascribed to the (presumed) success of macroeconomics. In this respect, the claim that macroeconomics is isolated might be itself a subtle claim (i.e., a claim that only genuine experts can assess) which, in and of itself, would seem to condemn macroeconomics to isolation.[13]

While the arguments in this section are far from conclusive, I believe that together they make a plausible *prima facie* case for the hypothesis that macroeconomics is a cognitive island. However, since, in this paper, I am more interested in exploring the consequences of this hypothesis (if true) than in establishing its truth, let me assume that the hypothesis is true and focus on some of its consequences.[14] In particular, Nguyen argues that, while cognitive islands might not be "entirely unnavigable," they are "a treacherous going" (Nguyen 2020b, 2817). In the rest of this paper, I focus on some of the reasons why this seems to be true of macroeconomics.

3. COGNITIVE ISLANDS AND EXPERT SHOPPING

There seem to be at least two reasons for ordinary people to turn to experts in macroeconomics. The first is that, in their capacity as economic agents, ordinary people are interested in the current and future state of the economy. Someone who is planning to start a new business might wonder if a recession is around the corner. Someone who is thinking of buying a house might want to know if the high real estate prices are the result of a speculative bubble. Someone who is deciding between a fixed-rate and a variable-rate loan might want to know how whether the benchmark interest rates are more likely to go up or down over the loan's amortization period. Someone who is negotiating a multi-year employment contract might want to know what the inflation rate is likely to be over the duration of the contract.

The second reason is that, in their capacity as voters, citizens of democratic countries are expected to be able to evaluate the feasibility and effectiveness of policy proposals put forward by different political parties or candidates as well as the effectiveness of the policies enacted by current holders of political office, and this often presupposes more expertise in macroeconomics than most ordinary citizens have. For example, in a democracy, ordinary citizens should be able to evaluate the plausibility of the sorts of economic claims routinely made by political candidates or holders of political office (e.g., the claim that tax cuts promote investment and productivity, or that increasing the minimum

[10] See (Bernanke 2004) for a discussion.

[11] Although even this is not undisputed (see, e.g., (Gadea, Gómez-Loscos, and Pérez-Quirós forthcoming)).

[12] As suggested, for example, in (Bernanke 2004).

[13] I am very grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this journal for suggesting this line of argument.

[14] Those who find my *prima facie* case for the conclusion that macroeconomics is a cognitive island unpersuasive might still find what I say in what follows interesting, as I suspect that what I say about macroeconomics might apply *mutatis mutandis* to other fields of expertise that seem to be cognitive islands (e.g., climate science).

wage would cause unemployment to rise, or that public debt has reached an unsustainable level, or that the banking sector need stricter regulation).

In this paper, I focus primarily on this second reason why ordinary citizens turn to economic experts.[15] In theory, this should be a standard case of the division of epistemic labor. Since ordinary citizens cannot become experts in each and every policy-relevant issue, they should rely on the opinions of genuine experts in assessing public policy (whether prospectively or retrospectively). The problem with this idea when it comes to macroeconomic is that the public figures whom ordinary citizens tend to regard as experts in these matters (who include not just economists, but also journalists, politicians, and political commentators) often disagree widely and strenuously about economic matters. I have already briefly discussed one such disagreement in the introduction, but a simpler example might be helpful here. During the first term of the George W. Bush presidency, the US Congress enacted a host of changes to the federal tax code that came to be collectively known as the Bush tax cuts. The Bush tax cuts resulted in lower marginal federal tax rates for most US taxpayers, but, both before and after their enactment, there was widespread debate about their net effect on the tax revenues of the federal government. Their supporters argued that the cuts would not decrease federal tax revenues because what economists call the dynamic revenue change (i.e., the increase in tax revenue due to the taxpayers' behavioral responses to the tax cuts, such as increased productivity or investment) would offset the static revenue change (i.e., the decrease in tax revenue that would result from the tax cuts if taxpayers did not respond to them).[16] Opponents of the tax cuts, on the other hand, argued that federal tax revenues would decrease because the behavioral responses to the tax cuts would not offset the static revenue loss. Both sides of this debate could easily find experts who would support their view even long after the tax cuts had taken effect.[17] How do ordinary citizens decide which side of this debate to believe? In theory, they should listen to the most credible genuine experts.[18] However, in practice (and especially within the context of an increasingly sorted and polarized social and political environment),[19] many people are just likely to listen to the experts whose opinion best fit the views of their political "side."[20] Supporters of the Republican administration and supporters of the tax cuts are likely to believe the experts who told them that the tax cuts would/did not have a negative effect on tax revenues, while their political opponents are likely to listen to those experts who claimed that the tax cuts would/did have a negative effect on federal tax revenues.

To the extent that this hypothesis is correct, this approach to selecting macroeconomic experts is an instance of a more general phenomenon that is sometimes referred to as "shopping for experts." People *shop for experts* whenever they select those (presumed) experts who tell them what they want to hear (irrespectively of the available evidence bearing on the trustworthiness of those experts or on the correctness of their opinions). For our purposes, it is convenient to distinguish between two different kinds of expert shopping, which we might call, respectively, cynical and wishful expert shopping.

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[15] In theory, one would expect people to select experts wisely when they rely on these experts' opinions to make decisions that directly affect their own economic welfare. Unfortunately, the fact that people sometimes fall of dishonest financial advisors and financiers seems to show that what I call wishful expert shopping might occur even in cases in which people's economic welfare is directly at stake. However, I do not discuss this issue in this paper.

[16] See, e.g., the remarks by President Bush (White House 2006) or the opinion piece by then Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (Frist 2006).

[17] For opposite takes on the revenue effects of the cuts, see, e.g., (Wilson and Beach 2001) and (Kogan and Aron-Dine 2006).

[18] One possibility, for example, would be to rely on the opinions of neutral (genuine) experts. I'll discuss this option in §5 below.

[19] See, e.g., (Bishop 2009) and (Pew Research Center 2014).

[20] There is mounting empirical evidence that, in cases like this, people engage in what is sometimes called identity-protective cognition—i.e., they adjust their factual beliefs to fit with… (see, e.g., (Kahan 2013) or, for a slightly different approach, (Achen and Bartels 2016)).

Cynical expert shopping occurs when the expert-seeker has little or no genuine interest in the correctness of the selected expert's opinions. A standard example of cynical expert shopping is shopping for expert witnesses in a forensic context. For example, a defense lawyer might look for an expert who is willing to take the stand in a criminal trial to dispute the testimony of the prosecution's experts or to offer an alternative explanation of the evidence (irrespectively of whether the defense's expert opinion is correct or whether the expert genuinely believes the content of their testimony).[21] Another example of cynical expert shopping is when an industry association looks for experts who are willing to publicly question the evidence in support of scientific claims that are detrimental to the economic interests of the relevant industry (such as the claim that there is a causal link between tobacco smoking and lung cancer in the case of the tobacco industry or the claim that there is a causal link between human carbon emissions and climate change in the case of the oil industry (see, e.g., (Oreskes and Conway 2010)). Cynical expert shopping can be both epistemically and practically harmful. Epistemically, cynical expert shopping does not typically harm the expert-shopper but their audience (e.g., the jury members in the case of the criminal trial or ordinary citizens in the case of the debate about climate policy). Cynical expert shopping causes epistemic harm by polluting the epistemic environment, which increases both the chances of bad epistemic outcomes (e.g., people acquiring false beliefs or losing true beliefs) and the costs of achieving good epistemic outcomes (e.g., the amount of time and resources needed to acquire true beliefs or lose false ones). Cynical expert shopping is practically harmful insofar as its epistemic harms result in practical harms (e.g., a wrongful conviction or acquittal in the criminal trial case or a delay in policy action in the case of climate change).

Wishful expert shopping, on the other hand, occurs in spite of the expert-shopper's genuine interest in the correctness of the expert's opinion. Wishful expert-shoppers look for experts who tell them what they already believe or what they want to believe. Unlike cynical expert-shoppers, who display a disregard for the truth; wishful expert-shoppers only disregard for the evidence that bears on the credibility of the expert or the correctness of their opinions. A typical example of wishful expert shopping is when a patient who is concerned about the side-effects of the standard treatment for their condition turns to a homeopath who claims to offer a treatment that is both effective and free of side-effects (in the absence of any evidence bearing on the credibility of the homeopath's claim). As the label suggests, there is a connection between wishful expert shopping and wishful thinking. Wishful thinking is the tendency people sometimes display to believe a claim because they wish it to be true (irrespectively of the available evidence bearing on that claim). I suspect that people on a cognitive island are particularly prone to wishful thinking (and, consequently, wishful expert shopping), as the more subtle and isolated a domain of expertise is, the easier it is for a non-expert to engage in wishful thinking in that domain (especially when they have a strong motivation to do so). For example, a patient who has little understanding of physiology, biochemistry, and other medically relevant disciplines and who is motivated by an understandable desire to feel better might be particularly inclined to engage in wishful thinking and bring themselves to believe that their condition can be treated with a homeopathic treatment that contains only a miniscule amount of its alleged active principle (even in the absence of any evidence for the effectiveness of that treatment). One of the problems with wishful expert shopping is that wishful expert-shoppers, unlike cynical expert-shoppers, often shop for experts without fully realizing that they are doing so. Like cynical expert shopping, wishful expert shopping can also be both epistemically and practically harmful. It can be

[21] I should note that I am not necessarily passing a moral judgment on cynical expert shopping. For example, it could be argued that the role of the defense lawyer in an adversarial system is to show that there is reasonable doubt about the defendant guilt. On this view, it might be morally acceptable for a defense lawyer to engage in cynical expert shopping (at least insofar as the defense lawyer has no reason to believe that the expert is in bad faith). However, even if cynical expert morally permissible in certain contexts, it might still be problematic from a social point of view, as it might contribute to the erosion of trust in genuine experts.

epistemically harmful, as it can lead people to form or retain wrong beliefs (although in this case the epistemic harms primarily fall on the expert-shoppers themselves), and it can be practically harmful insofar as the epistemic harms result practical harms. For example, a cancer patient who is concerned about the side-effects of chemotherapy might be inclined to believe the naturopath who tells them that there are effective natural treatments for cancer that have no side-effects and they might decide to forgo the most effective treatment for their condition, thereby decreasing their chances of survival.[22]

While shopping for macroeconomic experts might not lead to consequences as dramatic as shopping for experts in domains such as healthcare, it, too, can have serious consequences. Economic policies can often have dramatic effects on society. For example, there is some evidence that economic recessions lead to an increase in so-called deaths of despair (Case and Deaton 2020).[23] Even when the effects of economic policy are less dramatic, they can still significantly affect people's lives. For example, one of the issues on which virtually all mainstream economists agree is free trade (see, e.g., (IGM 2012)). Despite this agreement, free trade tends to be unpopular among voters, and some politicians often express protectionist views on the campaign trail. One of these politicians was Donald Trump, who, after being elected President of the United States, appointed one of the few economists opposed to free trade, Peter Navarro, as Director of the Office of Trade and Manufacturing Policy. Under Navarro's watch, the Trump administration enacted a suite of protectionist measures, including a 25% tariff on steel and a 10% tariff on aluminum. It also engaged in an all-out trade war with China. Several studies seem to show that, as many economists had predicted, these tariffs had negative effects on the US economy (see, e.g., (Amiti, Redding, and Weinstein 2019) and (Fajgelbaum et al. 2020)).

Trump's pick of Navarro seems to be a particularly obvious case of expert shopping, as Trump appears to have picked Navarro precisely because of Navarro's unorthodox views on trade (Ball 2018).

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[22] Given the similarities between what I call expert shopping and what Nguyen (2020b) calls a runaway personal echo chamber, it might be worth to briefly compare the two phenomena. According to Nguyen, in a personal runaway echo chamber, "one's own flawed expertise will lead one to trust bad experts, which will reinforce one's mistaken beliefs and sensibilities" (Nguyen 2020b, 2805). One of the key differences between runaway echo chambers and expert shopping is that expert-shoppers are not necessarily motivated by a mistaken confidence in their expertise. Consider two of the cases of expert shopping I have mentioned so far—i.e., that of the defense lawyer and that of the patient. Presumably, the defense lawyer's choice of expert is not motivated by an excessive confidence in her own expertise in, say, blood spatter analysis but by a desire to win the case and the patient's choice of expert is not motivated by a mistaken confidence in his own expertise in, say, oncology but by a desire to get better. I think that the best approach is to think of runaway echo chambers as a phenomenon that can arise from a third kind of expert shopping, which we might call *overconfident expert shopping* and which is motivated by an excessive confidence in one's expertise in the field (and in the opinions based on that alleged expertise). So, for example, the first-year economics student who dismisses the opinions of a professional economist on the basis of his own basic knowledge of economics is engaging in overconfident expert shopping. On the other hand, the first-year philosophy student who believes those economists whose view better fit her own personal beliefs about how people behave, and society works, or they better suit her ideological, social, or political allegiances is engaging in wishful expert shopping. Both are choosing experts on the basis of what they already believe (or would like to believe), but the first student is doing so due to an excessive confidence in his own expertise in economics, while the second one is doing so in spite of her (admitted) lack of expertise in economics. I think there are a number of reasons to prefer this approach to Nguyen's own approach. The first is that both wishful and overconfident expert shopping can (in their more extreme forms) lead to something akin to what Nguyen calls a runaway echo chamber; however, on Nguyen's approach, only what I call overconfident expert shopping can give rise to a runaway echo chamber. The second is that, in the real world, it might be often difficult to distinguish between overconfident and wishful expert shopping (as we need to understand what exactly motivates the expert-shopper in order to distinguish between the two). The third is that, in the real world, the two motivations can be present in the same expert-shopper (given that a lack of expertise is, unfortunately, compatible with a high opinion in one's expertise). The last (and, admittedly, least important) reason is that 'runaway echo chamber' is not a particularly felicitous label, as, according to Nguyen's own characterization of an echo chamber as 'a social epistemic structure in which other relevant voices have been actively discredited' (Nguyen 2020a, 142), a runaway (personal) echo chamber would not count as a (social) echo chamber. (I would like to thank one of the reviewers for this journal for persuading me to rethink the relationship between expert shopping and runaway echo chambers.)

[23] Although they might also lead to an overall decrease in mortality (see, e.g., (Ruhm 2000)).

While it is difficult to tell whether the expert shopping in Trump's case was cynical or wishful, Trump seem to have performed some wishful expert shopping on behalf of his supporters. Presumably, Trump's supporters (many of whom were negatively affected by the retaliatory tariffs (Fetzer and Schwarz 2021)) believed Trump and his cherry-picked expert when they told them that the tariffs were in their country's best interest or that, as Trump memorably put it in one of his tweets, 'Trade wars are good, and easy to win' (Reuters 2018). Given that the effects of trade wars are, in some cases, difficult to detect (see, e.g., (Flaaen, Hortaçsu, and Tintelnot 2019)), Trump's supporters who were negatively affected by them might not even have been aware of that. Even those supporters who were aware (such as soybean farmers who were hit hard by retaliatory tariffs from China) did not necessarily blame Trump or Navarro for their economic woes (Long and Clement 2018).

As this case illustrates, wishful expert shopping on a cognitive island is a risky business. Although healthcare can be deceptively subtle (as, for example, when a patient mistakenly attributes the spontaneous improvement of their condition to a homeopathic treatment),[24] it is still relatively *un*subtle. Patients are often in a good position to determine when a treatment is working and, even more so, when it is *not* working. In fact, in many cases, no one knows better than the patient themselves that their condition has not improved in spite of a (supposed) treatment. Of course, a homeopath can always try to find some alleged explanation for why the treatment is not working for that specific patient or claim that the treatment takes longer to be effective. However, most patients eventually realize that a treatment is not working for them. In relatively unsubtle domains, wishful expert shopping can (and often does) result in buyer's remorse.

On a cognitive island, on the other hand, one can engage in unrestrained wishful expert shopping. Because cognitive islands are both subtle and isolated, there is not much ordinary people can do to check the credibility of experts or the correctness of their opinions. For example, ordinary citizens who trust experts who tend to oppose market regulation and who supported the deregulation of the financial sector would also trust experts who blame the Financial Crisis on the policies and decisions of the federal government (as opposed to blaming it on the deregulation of the financial sector). Ordinary citizens who trust experts who favor market regulation and who opposed the deregulation of the financial sector, on the other hand, would also trust experts who claim that deregulation was a crucial contributor to the crisis. If even a macroeconomic event as calamitous as the Financial Crisis is unlikely to provide ordinary people with an opportunity to reconsider which experts to believe, then it is difficult to see what could.[25]

4. ASSISTED EXPERT SHOPPING AND THE PROPAGANDISTIC USE OF EXPERTISE

In the philosophical literature on expertise, it is often assumed that people choose experts like they choose their cereals—they consider all the available options and then they pick what they take to be the best one by using a number of proxy indicators (e.g., the reputation of the brand in the case of cereals or the reputation of the affiliation in the case of experts).[26] This picture of expert selection, however, is not very realistic—the selection of experts takes time and resources, and ordinary people

[24] A field is deceptively subtle to the extent to which it is subtle but ordinary people are under the mistaken impression that it is not. As I suggest in the main text, healthcare seems to be deceptively subtle. For example, people tend to draw unwarranted causal conclusions about the effectiveness of a treatment from its being correlated with an improvement of a condition. Nguyen (forthcoming) discusses a number of other ways in which fields can be deceptively subtle (although he does not use that label).

[25] Although see §5 for a couple of suggestions in this direction.

[26] This way of framing the situation goes back to (Goldman 2001), which is, arguably, responsible for revitalizing the literature on experts in analytic philosophy. For a critical review of that literature, see (Guerrero 2016).

often outsource it to people or organizations they trust.[27] For example, one might simply rely on the recommendation of a friend to find a new doctor or that of a neighbor to find a good plumber. In these cases, one relies on what we might call *assisted expert selection*—i.e., *the (epistemic) client* relies (whether deliberately or inadvertently) on *an (epistemic) assistant* (i.e., a trusted person or organization) to select experts on their behalf. Most of us outsource the selection of economic experts as well. For example, people often rely on media organizations to select economic experts on their behalf. Given that expert selection is a resource intensive activity, assisted expert selection is just a component of the division of epistemic labor. However, as in other cases, there are potential risks in outsourcing one's epistemic labor to others. One problem is that assisted expert selection can often give rise to a principal-agent problem. The assistants can have practical interests and motives that are not always conductive to their acting in the best epistemic interests of their clients. For example, in the case of politicians and political parties, the motivation to win elections is likely to be stronger than that of informing voters. Under these conditions, assisted expert selection is likely collapse in what we might call assisted expert shopping. *Assisted expert shopping* occurs whenever the assistant in assisted expert selection engages in (cynical or wishful) expert shopping. Examples of assisted expert shopping include the case of Trump cherry-picking an economic expert on behalf of his supporters or that of media organizations that select (presumed) experts on the basis of their political views.[28]

In assisted expert shopping, the client does not actively shop for experts. The assistant is doing all the expert shopping for them. In fact, the client might often mistakenly believe that they are being presented with a balanced cross-section of opinions of (genuine) experts (a phenomenon we might call *false consensus*) or, conversely, that they are being exposed to a genuine disagreement among (genuine) experts (a phenomenon that is typically referred to as *false balance*). For example, people who do not consume a varied and balanced media diet effectively live in an epistemic bubble in which they are exposed only to the opinions of a narrow and highly curated set of (presumed) experts who have been chosen on their behalf by others (e.g., their favorite cable news channel).[29]

While the assistant might sometimes shop for experts wishfully, the more interesting and problematic case is the one in which the assistant engages in cynical expert shopping on behalf of their client(s). For example, a media organization might only pick (presumed) experts that supports the political or policy preferences of its ownership or management. Cynical assisted expert shopping seems to be both epistemically and morally blameworthy. The assistants are epistemically blameworthy insofar as they are displaying an epistemically culpable disregard for the epistemic interests of their clients. They are morally blameworthy both because they exploit their clients' epistemic trust in order to achieve their own practical goals and because they display a morally culpable disregard for the practical interests of their clients as well as those of others who might be affected by their clients' behavior and decisions.[30] However, the client is not entirely epistemically blameless either, as they are

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[27] On closer scrutiny, the analogy with cereal selection is closer than I suggested above. After all, the store management decides which varieties of cereals are sold in the store and how prominently the different boxes of cereals are displayed on its shelves.

[28] See, e.g., (Jamieson and Capella 2008) for an in-depth analysis of the conservative media ecosystem in the United States and the way in which it systematically and effectively insulates its inhabitants from outside opinions. For the notion of an epistemic bubble, see (Nguyen 2020a).

[29] Not all media organizations cherry-pick their (presumed) experts to the same degree. Readers of the *New York Times*, for example, tend to be exposed to a broader range of opinions about economic policy than viewers of Fox News or MSNBC, or readers the *Wall Street Journal*.

[30] While people or organizations who engage in cynical expert shopping often do so to persuade some audience, cynical expert shopping is not necessarily assisted expert shopping. The distinguishing feature of (cynical) assisted expert shopping is that the assistant exploits the trust that the client has in them while the cynical expert shopper does not necessarily do that. For example, the defense lawyer who engages in cynical expert shopping is not exploiting the trust that the jurors have in them (at least assuming that jurors do not tend to trust defense lawyers more than prosecutors).

ultimately epistemically responsible for deciding which sources to trust epistemically and a source that engages in expert shopping (whether wishfully or cynically) should not be trusted to perform assisted expert selection on one's behalf.

Assisted expert shopping seems to be particularly problematic when it comes to economic policy issues, as economic policy tends to be highly technical and its many effects tend to be very difficult to predict or assess. In order to be fully informed, the public would need to be exposed to the opinions of a range of (genuine) experts instead of the opinions of a handful of cherry-picked (presumed) experts. Moreover, the experts that contribute to the public discussion often only tend to focus only on specific aspects of each given issue rather than painting a balanced overall picture (see, e.g., (Rodrik 2015, chap. 6)). Consider again the debate over the causes of the Financial Crisis that I mentioned above. The Financial Crisis was a highly complex event with multiple contributing factors. When people look at it through the lens of politics or ideology, they will tend to emphasize some of those factors at the expense of others. For example, some blame it on the deregulation of the financial sector, while others blame it on the federal government's role in promoting the creation of a secondary mortgage market.[31] However, it is possible (and ,in fact, likely) that both explanations have some truth to them. The only reason why the two sides of this debate about the Financial Crisis appear to disagree is that one side tends to focus only on those aspects that can be used to emphasize the ills of government's intervention in the market, while the other side tends to focus only on those factors that can be used to illustrate the shortcomings of poorly regulated markets. The debate is not really about economics; it is a political or ideological debate that seems to presuppose the alarmingly simplistic false dichotomy—i.e., that either it is always good for governments to intervene in markets, or it is always bad. However, any economist who is not caught up in the political debate would likely concede that the fact that some interventions in the market by the government are ill-conceived does not mean that unfettered markets always perform best and the fact that unregulated markets typically lead to market failures does not mean that any effort to interfere with their operations will be effective or beneficial.

While, from an epistemic point of view, assisted expert shopping harms primarily individual clients, it can also have broader negative epistemic and practical consequences. In the case of policy-relevant macroeconomics, for example, the most immediate practical consequence of assisted expert shopping is that voters might not make the best-informed political decisions and, as a result, they might vote against their own interests (or against the best interests of society as a whole) or try to persuade others in their epistemic network to do the same. Moreover, assisted expert shopping can have negative epistemic and practical consequences of a more systemic nature. First, it might contribute to political polarization, as both sides of a political debate feel bolstered by what each side perceives as the overwhelming support of (presumed) experts for the position of their political side. Second, it contributes to undermining trust in genuine experts, as both sides are likely to see experts on the other side as ideologically or politically motivated shills. Third, as I just argued, it provides ordinary citizen with an incomplete picture of policy-relevant economic issues by turning those issues into fodder for simplistic political or ideological debates.

Politically motivated assisted expert shopping often results in what we might call a *propagandistic use of expertise*. Expertise is used propagandistically whenever an assistant engages in cynical expert shopping on behalf of their clients in an attempt to influence their beliefs in order to garner support for a political cause or agenda. For example, a conservative cable news show might host an expert who confidently claims that cuts in corporate taxes would result in an increase in domestic jobs in an attempt to persuade its mostly working-class viewers to support the curs (even if it is far from clear that corporate tax cuts result in more jobs (see, e.g., (Lester 2019)). Or, to pick another example, one

[31] See, e.g., (Wallison 2015).

of the main purposes of the burgeoning system of generously funded pro-business think tanks seems to be that of supporting a political agenda that, presumably, promotes the interests of their individual and corporate donors.

If, as some political scientists maintain, political allegiances are typically a matter of social or cultural identity rather than firmly held political beliefs, moral values, or policy preferences (see, e.g., (Achen and Bartels 2016)), then the propagandistic uses of expertise might be a relatively common occurrence. For example, if White working-class evangelical voters gravitate towards conservative media sources primarily because of their social and cultural identities (see, e.g., (PRRI 2020), they might also be predominantly exposed to the opinions of experts cherry-picked by people whose economic interests are very different from theirs and be persuaded that economic policies that clearly favor the ultra-rich are also in their own best interests or that of the country even when it is far from clear that this is the case.

Politically motivated expert shopping, in general, and politically motivated assisted expert shopping, in particular, pose a very serious threat for liberal democracies, as it contributes to undermining the possibility conditions for the sort of healthy public debate on which the proper functioning of liberal democracies seems to depend. In order for liberal democracies to function properly, its citizens need to be sufficiently knowledgeable and informed to understand and evaluate the different policy proposals before them. However, politically motivated expert shopping (and especially the sort of politically motivated assisted expert shopping that results in a propagandistic use of expertise) undermines the ability of citizens to understand and evaluate different policy options. So, to the extent that politically motivated expert shopping is prevalent in liberal democracies, it poses a serious threat to the democratic process.

5. NEUTRAL EXPERTS AND RECANTING EXPERTS

So far, I have painted a rather bleak picture. In this section, I critically examine two possible glimmers of hope. The first glimmer of hope is the existence of *neutral experts*. One might argue that that the problem of selecting experts on a cognitive island is somewhat mitigated by the existence of non-partisan experts and non-partisan institutions, such as the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), whose primary duty is to provide the House and Senate Budget Committees with 'independent analyses of budgetary and economic issues'.[32] For example, in the case of the Bush tax cuts (which I briefly discussed in §3), the CBO estimated that, over their first decade, they contributed 1.5 trillion USD to the federal government's debt (even without taking into account interest payments on the debt) (CBO 2012), which might seems to settle the partisan debate over whether the tax cuts were revenue neutral.

While, in principle, neutral (genuine) experts might give ordinary citizens a way to settle questions over which partisan (presumed) experts disagree, in practice, they do not seem particularly effective. First, even when public institutions are designed to be non-partisan, they are never fully insulated from political pressures given that they are typically subjected to some political oversight.[33] Second, it is not clear that non-partisan experts are necessarily neutral experts or, in fact, that there are completely neutral experts. Presumably, the employees of the CBO have their own (non-epistemic) values as well

[32] See https://www.cbo.gov/about/overview. Accessed October 7, 2021. See also (2 USC §602).

[33] The Director of the CBO is appointed by the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President of the Senate on the recommendation of the Budget Committees of the House and the Senate (2 USC §601). While these committees are supposed to select the candidate solely on the basis of the candidate's qualifications (2 USC §601), nothing prevents other considerations from tacitly factoring in their decisions. Moreover, both the Senate and the House can remove the Director (2 USC §601), so, while the institution might be non-partisan in theory, the Director of the CBO is still not fully insulated from political pressure in practice.

as their own views about policy and politics, so, while they might be non-partisan, they are likely not to be fully neutral and, if, as philosophers of science often argue, non-epistemic values are relevant even to seemingly purely epistemic decisions, then it is not clear to what extent any expert can be fully neutral when they work on issues that are socially or politically relevant. For example, estimating the net effect of the tax cuts on the government's tax revenues requires distinguishing that effect from other factors that affect those revenues. This is an incredibly complex task that requires making myriad unforced epistemic decisions that affect the ultimate result. So, even if those who engage in this exercise have no intention to reach a specific result, their unforced epistemic choices nevertheless contribute to the result they are reaching, and a different set of epistemic choices might have led to a different result. Third, even assuming that there are genuinely neutral experts, most people do not get their information straight from them—they get it through traditional and social media and, when these intermediary sources are biased,[34] they tend to filter out information that is not favorable to their political "side." So, the CBO's assessment of the tax cuts is more likely to reach those who already believe that the Bush tax cuts negatively affected government's revenues than those who believe that they did not. Finally, even when those biased intermediary sources do not filter out the opinions and views of experts that are not favorable to their political side, they usually present them along with commentary that is critical of them and that tends to undermine the credibility of those sources, which, given the technical nature of assessments of this sort and the many assumptions that go into them, can be easily accomplished by any motivated self-proclaiming expert. For example, the critics of the CBO's assessment might claim that the CBO is not as non-partisan as it claims to be.

A second possible glimmer of hope is the existence of *recanting experts*. A recanting expert is an expert who had publicly taken side in a public debate in their capacity as expert but who, later, publicly changes their view on that issue or admits that they were wrong on that issue. A case in point might be the former Chair of the Federal Reserve Alan Greenspan, who, despite being an outspoken opponent of market regulation, during a congressional hearing on the role of federal regulators in the Financial Crisis reluctantly admitted: 'I have found a flaw in the model that I perceived is the critical functioning structure that defines how the world works, so to speak' (Committee on Oversight and Government Reform 2010). Greenspan's unexpected admission attracted a great deal of attention in the press (see, e.g., (Andrews 2008), (Naylor 2008), and (Beattie and Politi 2008)).

The reason why recanting experts might be thought to offer a glimmer of hope is that, if an expert who was publicly on one side of a policy debate admit that they (and other experts on their side) were wrong about something, this might provide non-experts who were on the same side of that debate with a good reason to reassess both their own opinion on that issue and the credibility of the experts who used to be on the same side as the recanting expert before the expert recanted.

Unfortunately, however, even this glimmer of hope is faint. First, the phenomenon of recanting experts seems to be relatively rare on a cognitive islands (such as macroeconomics), where there is plenty of room for *post hoc* explanations of why one's predictions and opinions were not wrong despite the appearances. Second, it is not always clear when experts genuinely recant their views. For example, in Greenspan's case, it is far from clear that he has had a genuine change of heart. Despite what many newspaper headlines suggested, Greenspan made very limited concessions in his congressional testimony, and it is unlikely that his comments about the "flaws in his model" of the world or those "in his ideology" reflected his considered views on market regulation.[35] Finally, even when experts

[34] The bias of the intermediary sources does not need to be intentional. For example, social media users are typically more likely to share news stories that fit with their views and preferences of their political side, thereby, effectively filtering out news stories that they perceive to be unfavorable to their political side.

[35] Greenspan's considered views were likely better reflected in an opinion piece that he had published in the *Financial Times* a few months before his widely reported admission at the hearing. That opinion piece concluded with the following words: 'Thus it is important, indeed crucial, that any reforms in, and adjustments to, the structure of markets and regulation

genuinely recant, their side can try to spin their recantations. For example, the *Wall Street Journal* report on the hearing emphasized the pressure Greenspan was under during the hearing from its very title ('Greenspan Admits Errors to Hostile House Panel') (Scannell and Reddy 2008). Fox News's story did not even mention Greenspan's admissions in the title opting instead for the title 'Greenspan Says Economic Crisis Not His Fault, Calls It 'Once-in-a-Century Tsunami' (Fox News 2008).

6. PARTISAN EPISTEMOLOGY

In this section, I turn to a less pessimistic view of the overall picture I painted. One might argue that, in a non-ideal political and epistemic context, it might be permissible to assign higher credibility to an epistemic source on the basis of shared political allegiances.[36] Let me follow Regina Rini (2017) in calling this general view, *partisan epistemology*. More specifically, a partisan epistemologist might argue that, when faced with the difficult task of deciding which experts to trust on a policy-relevant matter, it might be epistemically permissible (or even advisable) for ordinary citizens to accord higher credibility to a co-partisan experts (i.e., experts whom they perceive as being on their "side").[37] One possible argument in support of this application of partisan epistemology is that, when it comes to policy-relevant matters, experts cannot avoid making value judgements,[38] and that co-partisan experts are more likely to make value judgments that are similar to the ones we would make if we were in their position.

While I cannot discuss this proposal in detail here, I think it should be fairly uncontroversial that the picture it paints is not much rosier than the one I painted. Even conceding (for the sake of the argument) that, in a non-ideal context, it is *epistemically permissible* to accord higher credibility to co-partisan experts, it is far from clear that it is *politically desirable* to do so. My pessimistic picture relies on the assumption that the proper functioning of liberal democracies depends on a healthy political debate and a healthy political debate seems to require that all parties share some common ground. Even if the parties do not share any values, they should at least be able to agree on "the facts." However, the problem is that, when it comes to policy-relevant matters, we typically have to rely on (genuine) experts to tell us what "the facts" are and, if it is epistemically permissible for each side to only trusts its own experts and these experts have plenty of room for (more or less reasonable) disagreement, there is little hope of finding common ground between all the different sides and political debate degenerates into partisan conflict and ideological propaganda. While, from an epistemological point of view, there might be a difference between a political expert shopper and an epistemic partisan, from a social and political point of view, a liberal democracy in which a sufficiently large proportion of citizens are either expert shoppers or epistemic partisans seems to be doomed to political disfunction.

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not inhibit our most reliable and effective safeguards against cumulative economic failure: market flexibility and open competition' (Greenspan 2008). These do not seem to be the words of a man who has substantially changed his mind about the merits of *laissez-faire* economics.

[36] Regina Rini, for one, has argued along these general lines with regards to the transmission of political testimony on social media (Rini 2017).

[37] Just to be clear, Rini (2017) does not discuss this application of partisan epistemology (let alone endorse it).

[38] Perhaps, the most standard argument for this view is the so-called argument from inductive risk (see, e.g., (Rudner 1953) and (Douglas 2009)).

7. CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the social-epistemic phenomenon of expert shopping and with a particular focus on expert shopping on cognitive islands. While the emphasis was primarily policy-relevant economics, I suspect that much of what I said applies *mutatis mutandis* to other policy-relevant areas of expertise and especially to those that also happen to be cognitive islands. For example, I would speculate that climate science is also a cognitive island and that many voters rely on assisted expert shopping to inform their views on climate policy. However, expert shopping might even happen in policy-relevant areas of expertise that are deceptively subtle (such as public health or epidemiology). Moreover, if, as many believe, liberal democracies are increasingly sorted socially and polarized politically, then, given certain well-documented individual or social cognitive dynamics (such as cognitive biases or identity-protective cognition), expert shopping might be a pervasive phenomenon. If this conclusion is correct, then this should be a very serious concern for liberal democracies, as expert shopping (and, in particular, the sort of assisted expert shopping that results in a propagandistic use of expertise) contributes to undermining the sort of healthy public debate on which the proper functioning of a liberal democracy depends. While my conclusion might sound very pessimistic, let me close on a more optimistic note—my hope is that we can find ways to mitigate our individual and collective tendency to rely on expert shopping (especially when it comes to policy-relevant issues) and that social epistemologists and democratic theorists might be able to contribute to that effort.

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