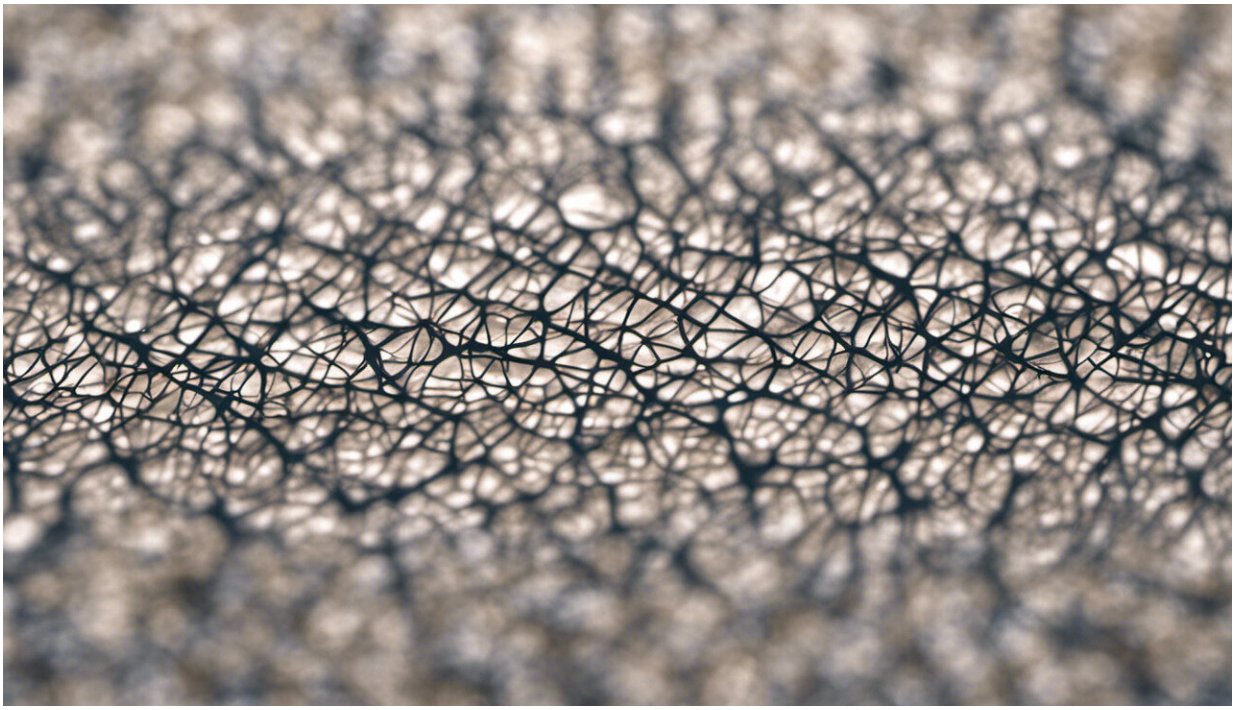
Distrust of experts happens when we forget they are human beings

May 12 2017, by Rod Lamberts



Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

In 2016, conservative, pro-brexit, British politician Michael Gove announced that people in England "…have had enough of experts with organisations from acronyms saying that they know what is best and getting it consistently wrong."

In the US, Donald Trump famously doesn't believe any expert who doesn't agree with him. Our most recent former Prime Minister Tony Abbott has also been accused of having trust issues.

Growing distrust of experts is linked with changing social and political climates. But it also stems from misunderstandings about what experts are, and what their obligations to society entail.

At their heart, criticisms of experts often imply that they are servants, commodities or so vested in their field they can't relate to reality.

To restore trust in experts, we need to remember they are, first and foremost, human beings.

How detractors define and judge experts

It's probably safe to assume politicians are working from a relatively simple definition of "expert", such as: "an expert is a person with specialist knowledge not commonly held, or likely to be understood, by a layman."

When people like Trump make assertions about the right and proper role of experts in public conversations, they appear to have an implicit list of infringements that experts must never transgress.

Expressing values or opinions

Detractors claim that when speaking as an expert, the things you say in public should be untainted by your values and opinions. In essence, you should be a passive conduit for information or facts.

University of Colorado Professor Roger Pielke offers a subtle disdain

for experts occupying this position when he critiques the "stealth issues advocate", a role "characterized by the expert who seeks to hide his/her advocacy behind a facade of science, either pure scientist or science arbiter."

Deviating from the straight and narrow

Critics of experts believe that should you even *appear* to deviate from your role as a neutral presenter of facts (for example, by offering policy advice), you are no longer an expert and/or cannot be trusted.

This is typified by Myron Ebell when he was head of Donald Trump's Environmental Protection Agency transition team. He said:

"[…] whenever you hear an environmental expert, think that he is an urban eco-imperialist."

Making mistakes

Those who criticise experts assert that if you get something wrong, you are no longer an expert and/or cannot be trusted. Myron Ebell referred to experts as "the expertariat", saying:

"The people of America have rejected the expertariat, and I think with good reason because I think the expertariat have been wrong about one thing after another, including climate policy. "

All of these criticisms forget one thing: experts are human beings.

To suggest that the benefits of expertise can be delivered "value-free" is naive. Like all people, experts are influenced by politics and biases, emotions and beliefs. They are motivated, active agents who create,

process and communicate knowledge. Experts are not passive conduits.

The reality of the expert

To consider the role of experts in public debates, I'm drawing on my own area of expertise: science communication. In the spirit of this article, I should note that I claim expertise here based on nearly 20 years of university-based research, practice, and teaching as well as my experience providing consultancies in Australia and around the globe.

In my realm, the most interesting grist for discussions around experts and trust turns up wherever science-*related* (but not always science-*based*) assertions are flung around in contests over socially contentious issues.

Climate change action, the acceptance of genetically modified foods, and compulsory childhood vaccination are three classic examples where this regularly plays out in public.

Of course in examples like these, the role of expertise is not straightforward. For starters, exactly what constitutes pertinent specialist knowledge is itself up for debate.

Scientific aspects of disagreements about climate change, genetic modification or vaccination are regularly accompanied by arguments grounded in social, political, economic and religious concerns. And well they should be – these are not uni-dimensional issues. It's not simply a matter of 'getting some expertise', it's also about working out which expertise is relevant, and to whom.

In an ideal world, the evidence-based assertions of experts withstand evidence-based challenges, and are modified where they are found wanting. It's through the open, honest, systematic contest of ideas among

experts that the best ideas emerge.

Clearly the place of the expert in public conversations on these issues depends on many factors: the goal(s) of the conversation; the knowledge, interests and positions of the parties involved; and importantly, the types of people who might be 'listening in'.

But more, it should also depend on what the experts themselves want to achieve. Like anyone else, experts have their own motives, even when overtly wearing their expert hat.

Traditionally, an expert's motivation for participating in public conversations as an expert will be rooted in a desire to inform, guide, advise or warn based on their specialist knowledge.

But equally – and often simultaneously – they could be driven to participate because they want to engage, inspire or entertain. They themselves may also hope to learn from their participation in a public conversation.

Or maybe they just want to be noticed (and there's nothing wrong with that).

So, what's the place of experts in public conversations?

Assessing the actions of experts using criteria that downplay, and even ignore, the fact that they are people makes it easier to admonish them and dismiss their expertise because they dare to have opinions, to make mistakes, or to pick a side.

US Navy Professor Tom Nichols says we live in:

"[…] a manic reinterpretation of 'democracy' in which everyone must have their say, and no one must be 'disrespected.'"

This is a place where, at the extremes, positions put forward by experts are deemed suspect *because* they come from experts.

In a world where facts and logic are considered malleable, and where powerful, influential interest groups cast doubt on the notion of expertise *itself*, it's the place of the expert in public conversations to help turn this tide.

It's my opinion that the expert should strive to be seen as *more* human, to embody at every opportunity their position as a part of society, as a person who has interests and opinions *and also* expertise.

How they choose to do this, however, should be up to them.

This article was originally published on The Conversation. Read the original article.

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Distrust of experts happens when we forget they are human beings (2017, May 12) retrieved 17 July 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2017-05-distrust-experts-human.html

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.