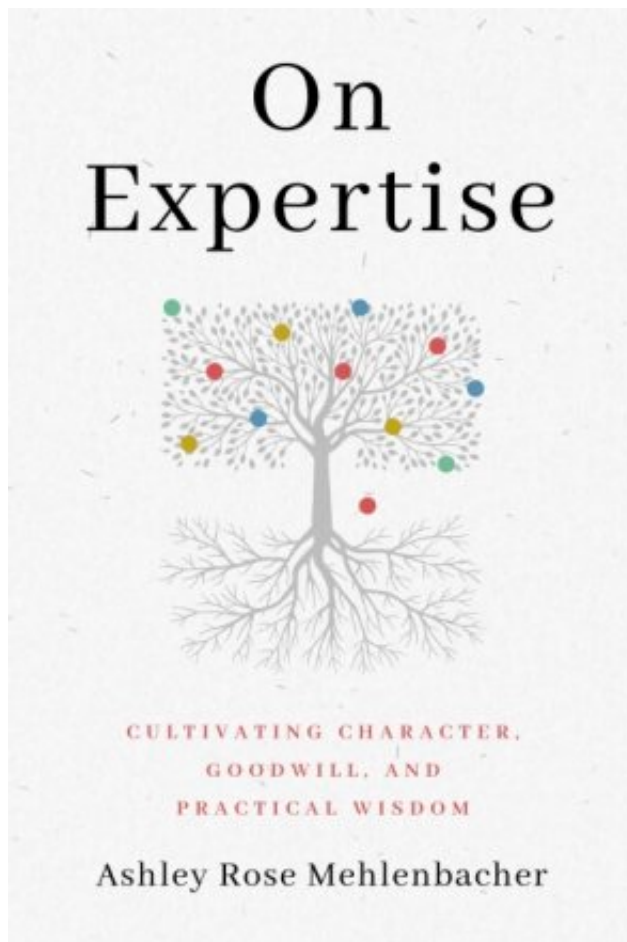


Why people trust or distrust experts when it comes to critical issues

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Credit: Penn State University Press

These days, it doesn't take much to set off a heated online debate. Anyone can publicly share their opinion, but not everyone is concerned

with accuracy or acting in good faith. And when it comes to critical issues such as the pandemic and climate change, trusting the wrong people can have serious consequences.

"The varieties of expertise involved in understanding and responding to the pandemic has shown us assessing [experts](#) and their expertise is a difficult challenge," says Ashley Rose Mehlenbacher, a University of Waterloo professor of English and Canada Research Chair in Science, Health, and Technology Communication. Her research looks at how people perceive expertise.

"Figuring out who we should be listening to, and who to trust, has been further complicated by misinformation as well as bad faith appeals by bogus experts. Such appeals can have devastating, deadly consequences."

Who do we trust as experts, and why?

Neither individuals nor organizations can be experts on everything, so we rely on others to help us make more informed decisions. It might be someone who has certain credentials or holds a certain position—a [medical doctor](#) or university professor, for instance.

But there's much more to it than that, Mehlenbacher says. Her recent book, "On Expertise," looks at how people perceive and position expertise—especially experts themselves.

How we understand expertise draws on many disciplines, including ethics, sociology, psychology and education, as well as Mehlenbacher's field: rhetoric. She found that when experts talk about expertise, problem solving skills and how we relate to one another are key. "How should we discern there is indeed a problem, deliberate upon it, and do so in a situated manner to take the appropriate action?"

The concept of "expert" is also evolving. For instance, Mehlenbacher's research engages with citizen scientists—everyday people involved in science who often have important expertise to contribute. For example, Safecast is an international, citizen-led science group started after the nuclear disaster at Fukushima Daiichi in 2011.

"Expertise comes in many varieties, not just scientific but also local knowledges, traditional knowledges and Indigenous Knowledges. Including different types of expertise is necessary for addressing complex issues," Mehlenbacher says.

Why trust in experts is eroding

If you've spent any time online lately, you've likely seen the distrust and disdain leveled at experts. For Mehlenbacher, it's not only the change in perception of experts that's important—it's what is driving this change.

First, it can be difficult to tell who is actually a credible expert. With the anonymity of online platforms, anyone can claim credentials on their profile and that makes people worried they will trust the wrong person or be fooled. These fake or bogus expert accounts can also create and spread disinformation and misinformation designed to undermine trust in experts, she says.

Even more troubling are attempts to discredit legitimate experts using bad faith critiques. In her research on [climate change](#) communications, Mehlenbacher has seen several tactics including claims that a researcher is biased because of career ambitions, or "purity tests" such as suggesting a climate scientist who uses commercial flights is a hypocrite.

"We also see sexism, racism, antisemitism, transphobia and other prejudices used to undermine an expert's credibility," Mehlenbacher says. "For instance, the sexist 'climate Barbie' insult or attacks on women

in public health leadership roles during the pandemic."

There are also legitimate reasons for distrusting experts and institutions, for example, marginalized groups of people may have been harmed by them.

"Understanding the ways in which sexism, racism, antisemitism, ableism and other forms of prejudice have been enacted by experts and institutions is crucial," Mehlenbacher says.

Reclaiming credibility

While we should all be approaching information with [critical thinking](#), Mehlenbacher notes that there are some ways experts can build trust through how they communicate.

"Communicating knowledge and limitations in a transparent manner and demonstrating an understanding of the situations and audiences can be effective," she says. "For instance, public health officials who explain the evolving pandemic situation, the limitations of what is currently known, and the reasons why they're making certain decisions. But there are no easy answers."

Another pressing question for Mehlenbacher is how to support women and other groups who disproportionately face online attacks for participating in the public sphere.

"We need to look at how different bad faith attacks operate and create ways to support the people affected," she says. "Numerous researchers have lamented the contemporary erosion of [good faith](#) conversation on topics where expert knowledge is important. Now more than ever, exploring [communication strategies](#) that acknowledge and understand the complexities of expertise in its various forms is a goal worth

pursuing."

More information: "[On Expertise: Cultivating Character, Goodwill, and Practical Wisdom](#)" is available from Penn State University Press.

Provided by University of Waterloo

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