

What has killed people's trust in experts?

The opinions of experts are usually convincing to the public, because for the public, experts hold authoritative knowledge, and they have a good understanding of their field. A [new Pew Research Center survey](#) shows that till August 2019, public confidence in scientific experts is on the rise.

However, it seems that this is not always the case. "People are quite capable of viewing scientists as lousy experts when it comes to specific issues that don't fit their notions of what's true," says Sharon Dunwoody, professor emerita at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. The most striking example is that during the covid-19 pandemic, many people showed distrust of experts and rejected their health advice, because they believe that experts are not helping to solve problems ethically and responsibly. Some people also questioned that global warming is a hoax and that scientists are manipulated by capital and politics. So, what has killed people's trust in experts?

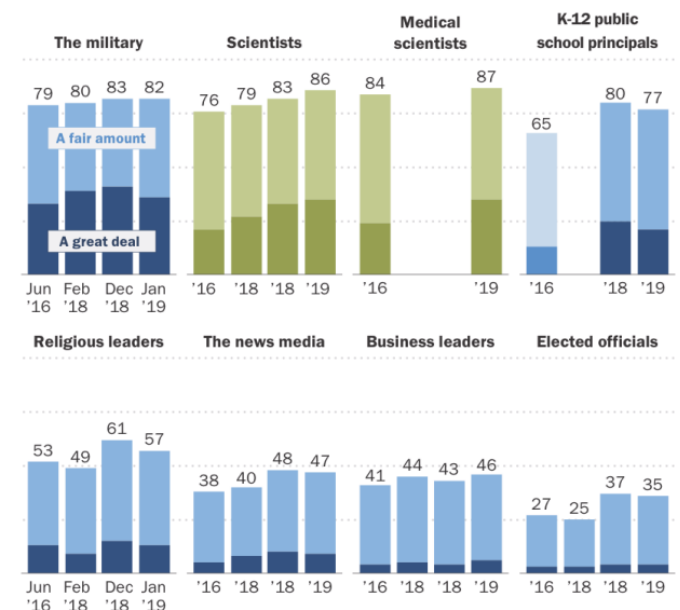
We must admit that experts do make mistakes, even in the field they are proficient in. Sometimes this is because they have limited knowledge on those things, sometimes because of carelessness, and sometimes because they are not responsible for their words and actions. In 2019, the Boeing 737 max aircraft was grounded due to multiple crashes. This is because the

aircraft experts made mistakes in designing and manufacturing the aircraft, and those experts who found the problem failed to persist in exposing the problem and dealing with it. They are experts, but they made mistakes intentionally or unintentionally in their fields, and even worse failed to correct them responsibly. After the disasters, many people no longer trust Boeing.

Sometimes, experts will deliberately mislead others for their own purposes. For money, power, politics, or other purposes, they ignore morality and responsibility and use their reputation to mislead the public to do things that are beneficial to them. For example, some medical experts and doctors use patients' trust in them to over-check and over-treat to earn more money, which leads to patients' distrust of doctors. This phenomenon once existed widely in China, and [a survey](#) in 2017 showed that less than 30% of patients trusted doctors. It wasn't until the government started politics that the situation began to improve.

Americans' confidence that scientists act in the public interest is up since 2016

% of U.S. adults who say they have a great deal or fair amount of confidence in each of the following groups to act in the best interests of the public



Note: In 2016, question asked about confidence in K-12 public school principals and superintendents. Respondents were randomly assigned to rate either their confidence in "scientists" or "medical scientists" in 2016 and 2019. Respondents who gave other responses or who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted Jan 7-21, 2019.

"Trust and Mistrust in Americans' Views of Scientific Experts"

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Another situation is that some experts may be under external pressure. To protect themselves or some other people, they may decide not to tell the truth. Anthony Fauci, the nation's leading infectious disease expert and a key member of the White House coronavirus task force, acknowledged that when covid-19 just started to spread, due to the political pressure and to avoid the panic that may be caused to medical staff due to the shortage of personal protective equipment, he did not recommend to the public to wear a mask, where masks have now proven to be very useful. He also released some other remarks and then changed his words. Even if his actions can be forgiven to a certain extent, it still led to a decline in people's trust in him because some people suspect that there are political elements in his proposition.

Fake experts are also important factors affecting society's trust in experts. In nowadays that the Internet is developed, social software and self-media platforms are [flooded with fake experts](#). They pretend to be real experts, but they don't really know their field, and certainly will not be responsible to the public. However, many people lack formal education or comprehensive knowledge in these fields, they cannot always distinguish between fake experts and real experts. When the "truth" that people have always believed is overthrown time and time again, they began to have doubts about all experts.

So what can be done to restore people's trust in experts?

Firstly, the professional knowledge and moral quality of experts need to be guaranteed. People without professional knowledge should not be called experts, and those "experts" with bad intentions should not be allowed to act recklessly. Therefore, those who grant the title of "expert" should carefully assess their professional knowledge and skills, companies and institutions should also pay enough attention to the ethics of their experts.

Furthermore, in addition to the requirements of the experts themselves, there should be other measures to ensure that the experts will not do wrong. Unethical or irresponsible behaviors of experts should be investigated and punished, establishing supervision and punishment systems can reduce these behaviors by enforcing them to undertake the consequences of their actions, thereby making them more careful about their words and actions. On the other hand, experts should also be protected from being disturbed by other external factors, like reducing unreasonable repressive rules, or avoiding from being politicized, thus to avoid experts doing unethical things to protect themselves, or even use their expertise to do things harmful to the others.

In addition, the public also plays a very important role. Enhancing scientific education for the public can help them identify fake experts and at the same time enhance their judgment on what the experts say. The real experts can also do more on popular science propaganda to reduce the influence of fake experts on people. As the public, we should [believe in science](#), however we should not blindly believe the words of experts, but to use them as a reference.

The decline in public trust in experts is not caused solely by the public or experts unilaterally. Similarly, restoring trust also requires the joint efforts of experts, the public and other stakeholders.