Rejection of Expertise

SUMMARY: Public skepticism toward well-credentialed experts is growing, in part because of a perception that they have failed to recognize or address persistent sociopolitical problems. Expert pronouncements are having less impact on public perception, with the public turning instead to non-credentialed and "unofficial" sources for guidance and information. At the same time, information is increasingly able to route around gatekeepers, diminishing their influence and ability to shape discussion and debate.

Forecasts

- Rejection of expertise could exacerbate polarization and make governing large structures (such as nations) and small organizations difficult due to lack of shared consensus about reality.
- There will be new "experts" whose credentials won't come from experience or academia but rather from new skills—media training, networking, etc.—that afford them the appearance of expertise.
- A bifurcation will emerge between people who respect traditional expertise and those who don't.
- People's overconfidence in their own expertise has been growing for years. A shock to society—pandemic, political crisis, etc.—could be one path to reestablish the worthiness of "traditional" experts.

Key Uncertainties

Evolution of the media and its role

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Need for information management or filtering

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Success of pro-expert and pro-fact countermovements

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Evolution of new kinds of consensus

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Impact of populist politics

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Changing role of credentials and education

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Impact of the evolving economy

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Supporting Trends

- **Political polarization and class.** Political polarization between the highly educated and those with only a high school degree is becoming more extreme in the United States.
- **Public doubts about science.** Scientists perceive that public trust in science is diminishing and, indeed, a recent poll shows some loss of optimism about science, though science is still well-respected.
- **Doubting doctors.** Americans' trust in doctors is at a 40-year low.
- **The rise of fake news.** Fake news—unsubstantiated rumors or outright falsehoods presented as fact—is a growing phenomenon that came to a head in the United States during the 2016 presidential election.
- **Erosion of trust in the media.** Americans' trust in mainstream media is at an all-time low.
- **Declining attention spans.** The American attention span is attenuating in the face of technologies that provide constant distraction and interruption.
- **"Alt tech" social media.** American political polarization is affecting technology, with the rise of an "alt tech" ecosystem that is creating alternatives to popular social media.
- **Political lenses on media.** Americans on both sides of the political divide get news from similar sources, but how they view those sources is different.

Related Drivers of Change

- Declining Trust
- The Splintered Society
- Ethical Consumption
- Reputation by the Numbers

Notable Data Points

FAKE NEWS

64% of Americans surveyed believed that **fake news was causing a great deal of confusion** about the basic facts of current issues and events.

Source: Pew Research Center

POLITICAL MEDIA

In a survey of news habits, **34% of Republicans reported viewing cable news as "helpful"** while only 19% of Democrats did.

Source: Pew Research Center

TRUST IN DOCTORS

A 2016 survey found only **39% of Americans had "a great deal or quite a lot" of confidence** in the medical profession.

Source: Gallup

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Strategic Insights

- Associations are seen as institutions that embody and promote expertise, inherently or through their members. A move away from traditional expertise threatens both associations' reputations and their roles as gatekeepers. Associations will need to find ways to protect these functions, inasmuch as these functions affect the goals and missions of the association.
- At the same time, new opportunities are arising to present associations as trusted sources. As credentials (a tested or demonstrated level of knowledge) challenge expertise (a perceived mastery of knowledge), associations and other organizations can take the lead in establishing standards for credentials.
- With their experience and reputation, associations could establish a role as bulwarks against the challenge to expertise and help lead the fight for the proper role of expertise in policy and politics.
- With their expertise in media and messaging, there is a role for associations to serve as 21st-century media platforms for micro-celebrity experts. The key would be to support those aligned with the association's purpose and goals.

Timing

- **Stage:** Continued growth, as this skepticism is being granted new levels of legitimacy
- **Speed:** Medium, for both the phenomenon and its effects

Potential Alternative Futures

- **The ebb of populism:** A move away from populism reduces anti-expertise trends, as much of the anti-expertise impetus is driven by the strong line of anti-intellectualism undergirding populist political movements.
- **STEM to the rescue:** The fixation on STEM education as a cure-all for America's economic woes leads to a new belief in experts.
- **New education models:** New educations models such as massive open online courses (MOOCs) or (semi-)professional credentialing makes education cheaper and easier to access.

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Take Action

- **Defend your brand as a trusted source.** Many associations strive to be unbiased arbiters of information and curators of quality information. You will need to practice vigilance and invest resources to defend your brand promise.
- **Be meticulous about information you use and share.** Source and validate the information you distribute through your communication channels. Use credible methodologies in your own industry research.
- **Teach critical thinking and information literacy.** Educators recognize the need to prioritize these skills. If you are in a field without established norms for evaluating information, you may need to help your members address this skills gap.
- **Fight distrust with better relationships.** People often distrust a profession but trust the professional they know and see. They accept expertise when they perceive experts care about them.
- **Confront the skepticism you earned.** In the past, your members may have acted in ways that led the public to distrust their expertise. Own these ethical failures and clean up your reputation with new policies and practices that reinforce reliable information and trustworthy behaviors.
- **Cultivate and equip a rapid response team of experts.** Misinformation spreads quickly today. Organize a trained team prepared to counter bad information with well-researched and reasoned expertise.
- **Market credentials as proof of expertise.** If you have a rigorous credentialing program that distinguishes competence, educate the public and employers about why credentialed individuals are qualified. If your credentialing program is weak, take steps to strengthen its credibility.

Keyword Search

To continue researching this change driver, use these search terms:
trust, experts, expertise, "credentialism," reproducibility crisis, filter bubbles, media bubbles, trust in institutions, meritocracy

Who Will Be Affected

Associations with members in communications and media are at the forefront of countering public misinformation. Members of some professional, medical, and scientific societies already are experiencing loss of public confidence in their expertise. Credentialing organizations may be able to play a larger role in validating expertise. Education organizations may choose to lead in teaching information literacy and critical thinking skills.

About ASAE ForesightWorks

ASAE ForesightWorks is a deliberate, evidence-based research program and emerging line of products to provide association professionals with a continual stream of intelligence about the changes facing the association industry, including:

- regularly updated action briefs;
- tools for applying insights from the research in your association;
- guidance in performing environmental scans; and
- opportunities to engage with peers around the research.

Ultimately, the program's mission is to empower association leaders to create a culture of foresight.

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