

# Why Telling Students to 'Trust the Experts' Is Poor Advice

Intellectuals have an abundance of knowledge and influence, but they, too, have biases and blind spots.

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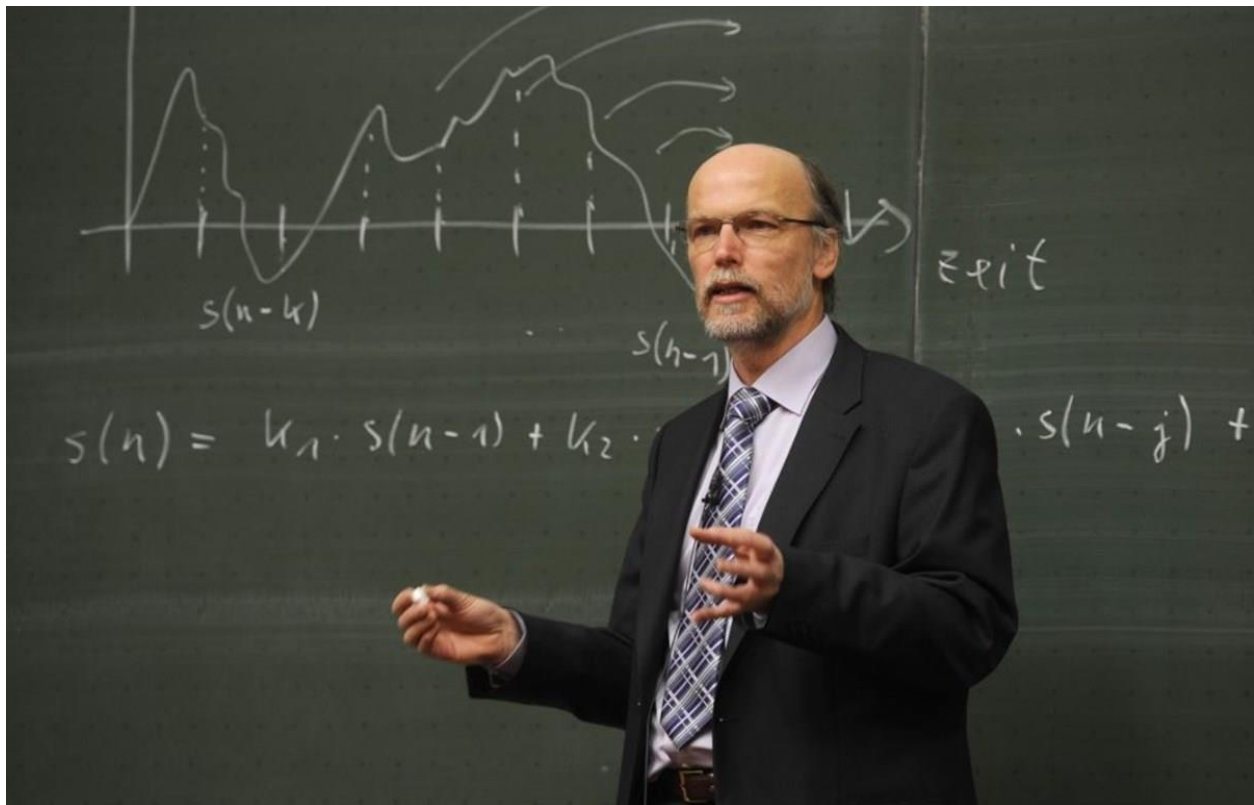


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[Caroline Breashears](#)

Among our country's many ailments is the spread of fake news. As Beth McMurtie argues in a [recent article](#) in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, "disinformation and propaganda are flourishing," with people increasingly in "politically polarized media ecosystems."

Fortunately, there are doctors in the house. Specifically, universities are full of professors with doctorates in education, history, and communication who seek to cure students of disinformation.

Unfortunately, a number of these experts also spread the disease, like medieval doctors who failed to sanitize their own hands.

For instance, one professor that McMurtie interviewed, Jennifer Mercieca, observes that many students following politics "lean toward conservative outlets." That trend, she tells McMurtie, presents a particular "set of challenges" given the "right wing media's war on truth," including an attack on academics as "liars and misleading and corrupt."

Rather than disprove this perception of academic bias, McMurtie's article only confirms it by leaning heavily on conservative examples of prejudice. For instance, Professor Mercieca proudly insists that she never calls anyone a liar: "Such labels, she says, don't reveal anything about why someone like Alex Jones, a far-right radio-show host who promotes conspiracy theories, is as powerful and as successful as he is."

Instead she helps students do their own analysis of Donald Trump's rhetoric to see how he claims to "win" even when his projects (such as building the wall between Mexico and the U.S.) fail to meet with much success.

And so the article goes, with McMurtie offering examples of how to deal thoughtfully with the misinformed (conservatives).

There is certainly bias on the right, just as there is bias on the left and everywhere in between. The reason is not so much politics as human nature, our predilection to believe we know best.

As Benjamin Franklin observed at the Philadelphia Convention, “Most men indeed as well as most sects in Religion, think themselves in possession of all truth, and that where ever others differ from them it is so far error.”

In this case, the *Chronicle* showcases that tendency by downplaying examples of partiality on the left.

There is no mention, for instance, of the factual inaccuracies in the *1619 Project* promoted by the *New York Times*, despite substantial documentation by historians and [economists](#).

There is no reference to Paul Krugman’s column initially titled, “[How Many Americans will Ayn Rand Kill?](#)” Even the *New York Times* editors seem to have realized they had gone too far, changing the title to “When Libertarianism Goes Bad.”

There are no allusions to [NPR giving Vicky Osterweil](#) a platform to promote her book *In Defense of Looting*. Her interviewer did not even challenge Osterweil’s claims that looting enables people to “demonstrate that without police and without state oppression, we can have things for free,” or that “we have to be willing to do things that scare us and that we wouldn't do in normal, ‘peaceful’ times, because we need to get free.”

Can we all agree *now* that such comments are problematic, regardless of the speaker's political persuasion?

Instead, the *Chronicle* implies that students must be warned against conservatives and advised to trust real experts. Especially dangerous, according to one professor McMurtie interviewed, is the idea that “the traditional gatekeepers of information—journalists, scientists, and academics included—have been side-stepped by self-styled experts who think they can read raw data and determine the truth about mask-wearing and voter fraud.”

Is this really the solution? Drop the portcullis to exclude the supposed barbarians?

## **The Intellectual Gatekeepers**

The problems in that approach were signaled decades ago by the Austrian economist F. A. Hayek. In “[The Intellectuals and Socialism](#),” Hayek emphasizes the bias as well as the power of “intellectuals,” a class into which he places journalists, teachers, radio commentators, scientists, and doctors—the very “gatekeepers” stressed in McMurtie’s article. Hayek warns:

It is the intellectuals in this sense who decide what views and opinions are to reach us, which facts are important enough to be told to us and in what form and from what angle they are to be presented. Whether we shall ever learn the results of the expert and the original thinker depends mainly on their decision.

Hayek emphasizes that such intellectuals have “good intentions” but err in judging particular issues in relation to new ideals that fit their vision of an advanced society. The practical difficulties of achieving that society are of less interest than “the broad visions, the specious comprehension of the social order as a whole which a planned system promises.”

Hayek’s point is especially prescient given current debates on how to respond to COVID-19. Who are the intellectuals, and how much power do they urge us to cede to state governments in relation to where we travel and how businesses can function?

One source that McMurtie interviewed, Michael Caulfield, stresses that since students cannot process all the data on COVID-19, it is better to rely on experts: “You have to find someone who knows what they’re talking about. . . . And then think about whether what they’re saying is in the mainstream.”

Caulfield is right that the source of information matters, but the danger of his emphasis on “the mainstream” is that it could lead students away from other perspectives that might be true or partially true. As John Stuart Mill observes in *On Liberty*,

...even if the received opinion be not only true, but the whole truth; unless it is suffered to be, and actually is, vigorously and earnestly contested, it will, by most of those who receive it, be held in the manner of a prejudice, with little comprehension or feeling of its rational grounds.

Such prejudices not only heighten the polarization that McMurtie bemoans. They lead us to ignore how “experts” mislead us, as in the CDC’s changing [message about wearing masks](#). And they direct us away from

other scientific perspectives on the pandemic, such as [The Great Barrington Declaration](#).

If we want to heal our country, we have to start by healing ourselves. We have to acknowledge the prevalence of bias across the political spectrum and the prejudices we are in danger of spreading.

Otherwise, we are making our students less aware and our country more divided. No vaccine can cure that.



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