

How celebrity non-experts and amateur opinion could change the way we acquire knowledge

2 January 2019, by Ashley Morgan



GOOP founder Gwyneth Paltrow. Credit: [Kathy Hutchins/Shutterstock](#)

When digital media entrepreneur Andrew Keen [predicted](#) in 2007 that the user-generated focus of [Web 2.0](#) would lead to a reduction of well researched and factual information – and in turn the rise of amateur opinion – he was clearly on to something.

Over a decade later, and Keen's prognosis has, arguably, come true. The internet today is a source of seemingly endless amounts of easily digestible material. Countless people contribute to its "factual" information, and promote their own opinions as facts too. Through Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, people – particularly celebrities – are also able to promote products and ideas in a much more immediate and visual way. And to frame or reinvent themselves as experts in completely different areas than the ones they gained fame in.

Amateur experts

While people have long modelled and promoted fashionable clothing, for example, a number of celebrities have taken this idea further in the past ten years. They have broken away from the activities that made them famous – acting, singing, or sport – and [reinvented themselves as business people](#). They are now more than just promoters of certain products, nor those whose style should merely be copied. They are the "go to" for fashionable lifestyles.

That celebrities are moving into business is not such a surprise. Yet, the way in which they adopt expertise in matters on which they have no training is a new twist in the rise of the amateur. Spice Girl Victoria Beckham, is now a fashion designer, for example, and actress Gwyneth Paltrow is a lifestyle and "health" guru. When Beckham first launched her clothing line in 2008, fashion editors [were ready to be sceptical](#), but influential magazines such as Harper's Bazaar and Vogue were impressed. Despite no apparent training in design – her initial "expertise" in this matter came from her personal interest in clothing and being photographed wearing fashionable clothes – Beckham recently celebrated a decade as a [fashion designer](#).

Similarly, Paltrow's "modern lifestyle brand" GOOP sells [face creams and other products](#) under the umbrella of health and beauty. These are endorsed by Paltrow herself, and [contributing doctors help advocate](#) the so-called medicinal aspects of some of her products. Despite the chorus of criticism against Paltrow and GOOP's "[psuedo-science](#)", the company is now [reportedly worth US\\$250m](#).

Fame and facts

Using the internet as a tool to promote celebrity has also worked for erstwhile businessman Donald Trump. Despite never having held a position as

state governor (the common route to political power and presidency), and having no political expertise, Trump was able to become US president. Not least his ascendance was [due to a social media campaign](#) that relied on reproducing his "plain talking" rather than political rhetoric.

These new experts don't even have to be famous for another reason to demonstrate expertise. Ella Mills, for example, is a UK blogger who, through documenting her illness and experimenting with food, became a staunch advocate of "clean eating" (although she has since [tried to distance herself](#) from the term). This helped launch her "natural and honest" food brand, Deliciously Ella, without any experience as a dietitian.

Now anyone with a Twitter or Instagram account and an opinion can promote expertise, and celebrities can interact directly with fans, showing them how to emulate their own impressive lives.

While [social media](#) can be considered a force for good in education, the dominance of a point of view approach in this sphere – rather than true expertise – could have a negative impact on expert knowledge itself, and the idea that you spend time to train and gain qualifications in a chosen field before claiming expertise.

As more people turn to the internet and social [media](#) for information of all kinds, it might arguably be much harder to tell point of view from empirical and factual research, as they now both appear in the same place. A recent example of this is the [wider proliferation of pseudoscience](#). Pseudoscience itself is based on amateur opinions, and the issue with this is that social media becomes the supreme platform for perpetuating it. It is very easy to find information that confirms a point of view rather than challenges it.

As social media has proved that people can be successful with no obvious qualifications or training, and point of view increasingly confirms people's perspectives, scientific expertise might arguably be eroded. And as social media produces [financial incentives through marketing opportunities](#), the power of these "experts" could gain strength, creating a whole new shift in the acquisition of

knowledge. Keen originally predicted that rather than widening and diversifying knowledge, interactive media would inevitably lead to digital narcissism and an increasing narrowing of the self. While many people have benefited financially and in terms of social status, the quality of knowledge that has emerged from social media is increasingly narrow and difficult to gauge.

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