

GUEST ESSAY

Why Young Men Are Losing Faith in Science

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By Adam Frank

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A few years ago, on a flight, I was seated next to a man in his mid-20s. He looked at the astrobiology textbook I was reading and asked if I was a scientist. When I told him I was, his face lit up and he told me how much he loved science. He listened to podcasts like “The Joe Rogan Experience” and others where scientists came on as guests and talked about quantum mechanics, black holes and ancient aliens.

Encouraged by his enthusiasm, I told him that not everything on those shows was science (case in point: ancient aliens). I advised him to be on his guard. Then, with all earnestness, he told me while I was clearly OK, it was common knowledge that sometimes, on some subjects, science hid the truth.

After 30 years as a researcher, science communicator and university science teacher, I’ve been unsettled by what appears to be a growing skepticism of science among some of my Generation Z students, shaped in part by the different online cultures these young people have grown up in. While I cannot speak to what happens in every corner of the internet, I can speak to the one I’ve been invited into: the “manosphere” — a loose network of podcasts, YouTubers and other male influencers. I’ve appeared on some of the manosphere’s most popular shows, including Joe Rogan’s. I’ve watched how curiosity about science can slide into

conspiracy-tinged mazes rooted in misinformation. And I believe the first step out of the maze for young men begins by reasserting to them the virtue of hard work — an often grueling but indispensable part of finding the right answers in science.

Of course, women can be antiscience just as much as men; for example, some studies suggest women have more reservations about new vaccines than men. But the male tendency to view debates as adversarial contests that must be won at all costs is what may help to create a more alarming antiscience dynamic in the manosphere.

The manosphere can foster genuine interest in science among young listeners. But framing science as a debate to be won makes it easy to paint established scientists as opponents who must be overcome. And one of the easiest ways to win the debate is to suggest scientists are either self-satisfied elites who won't consider new ideas or, worse, liars who know the truth and are hiding it.

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While there can seem to be a sincere desire in the manosphere to learn more about topics like black holes and neuroscience, discussions in these communities can sometimes devolve into a compelling story about searching for “the truth” about the moon landings, ancient technology and climate change. That powerful story, repeated enough times, can become the background against which manosphere audiences come to see all science.

The way to counter this story is, ironically, already there in the manosphere. Research shows young men and women today want a higher purpose, a call to something greater than themselves. In the manosphere, figures like Jordan Peterson, a clinical psychologist with an immensely popular podcast, speak directly to this desire among young men.

Mr. Peterson has framed virtues like personal responsibility, honesty and a purpose-driven life as qualities that are important to manliness. Those same values surface in other manosphere interests, like rigorous athletic training and disciplined health regimens.

What does not get much airtime, however, is recognition that these are also the very virtues that guide science and its principal values of veracity, accuracy and precision — seeking the right answer. Essentially this is just honesty when it wears a lab coat. Reframing scientific inquiry as another area where these values are lived can help counter science skepticism.

All the scientific marvels on which modern society depends are the fruit of extreme dedication. Rockets, computers and lifesaving medicines all come from decades of effort by scientists hunkered over pages of calculation or the laboratory bench. They required the same tireless, single-minded effort every elite athlete understands. The fringe science appearing in young men's online social media feeds, however, requires none of that effort. Instead, it stands on proclamations based on profound ignorance and a disinterest in even the most basic scientific principles like those I'm teaching my freshmen this semester.

Good scientists are intimate with the limits of what they know and stand ready to learn in domains outside their expertise. They don't just claim they are right. Instead, they know the cure for their ignorance is to actively and rigorously test their own assertions. That kind of humility is no different from enduring the hardships required to become a champion middleweight boxer, a great rock climber or a master musician.

It's time to make that connection explicit, and the best place to start is with members of Gen Z themselves. If I could talk to that young man on the plane again, I would not simply tell him to exercise caution when it comes to fringe experts. I would instead explain the long traditions of scientific discipline and determination that built the jet he's flying in. Einstein's relativity, evolution and genetics, climate physics on any planet (even alien ones) — these topics are a thousand times more compelling than faked moon landings because they are not the fever-dreams of

hucksters but a direct vision of nature's outrageous beauty and complexity. Make the effort to walk down that road, embrace its honesty and humility and you'll be hooked forever.

From the comments

J **John**
Boston

I'm a high school science teacher and it is becoming more and more clear how online media is influencing our young men to believe that education (and science) is not worth their time. In my honors class, out of 25 students, only 4 are boys. In my AP class, only 3 out of the 21 are boys. Women are entering the field of science and challenging themselves in their education, while young men are opting out and believing that success is not found in school, but stocks, airBnB rentals, and even gambling. Our young men need better role models and their time on the internet should be monitored by parents to ensure they are not falling down the manosphere to alt-right pipeline.

A **Adam Frank**
Opinion guest writer

@John I agree completely. But I ended the piece the way I did by focusing on GenZ itself. Nobody wants to hear a lecture from their parents so we have to go directly to them and ask what do they think is important? By embracing new (actually old) narratives that link science to their heroes in other domains (elite athletes, creative musicians etc) we can show them how "fringe science" is a scam. You better not show up on stage with a guitar if you don't know how to play it. That's what these so-called experts are doing. If you want to shred you gotta have the chops. Its the same thing in science. That's the new story.

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