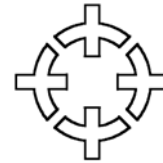




THE UNIVERSITY OF  
WESTERN AUSTRALIA



THE PSYCHOLOGY FOUNDATION OF AUSTRALIA

## MEDIA STATEMENT

Tuesday, August 7, 2007

### UWA RESEARCH UNDERSCORES VALUE OF SCEPTICISM IN JUDGING TRUTH

The release of false information about political or other issues requires greater scepticism and critical input from the public, according to a leading researcher at The University of Western Australia.

Psychology Professor Stephan Lewandowsky has found that people will sometimes continue to accept as truth the first information they are given about an event – even when they have later read or heard details that contradict the original version.

His ongoing research and its role in media reports of the “war on terror” is in focus at an international symposium hosted by the Institute of Advanced Studies at UWA all this week called *Terrorism and Torture: The Media, Psychology and Public Perceptions*.

Professor Lewandowsky is head of the Cognitive Science Laboratory at UWA’s School of Psychology. The School is a member of the Psychology Foundation of Australia – a non-profit group of 12 university psychology departments across the country that promotes public awareness of scientific psychology, its relevance and usefulness in human performance and in solving human problems.

Professor Lewandowsky said his findings had major implications when the number of different mainstream sources upon which the public relied for “truth” was increasingly limited.

He said as Australia looked to a Federal election later this year, it was crucial that the public carefully scrutinised the information they gathered from news outlets and the internet. His findings also demonstrate how important it is that the media prints and broadcasts reports based on journalists’ constant questioning of information provided to them.

“For the media and the public, the point is the same,” Professor Lewandowsky said.

“Read the information or hear it, make a note of it, remember it – but don’t jump to the conclusion that it’s necessarily correct – because intentionally or otherwise, it may turn out to be false.”

Professor Lewandowsky has won a five-year Australian Research Council grant to investigate how and why people continue to believe information even after they have been exposed to contradictory evidence.

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Belief in the presence of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) in Iraq is one example. A 2003 study by Professor Lewandowsky which surveyed the beliefs of American, Australian and German participants found that only Americans continued to believe that WMDs had been found in Iraq – despite all the contrary evidence.

Rather than this being due to idiosyncratic national characteristics, his research found that only those participants who were sceptical about government motives for participation in the war were able to update their memories with new, more accurate information.

“Irrespective of a person’s nationality, sceptics could update their memory – it just so happened that there were fewer sceptics in the US – hence those respondents overall tended to believe in WMDs more than people in Australia and Germany,” Professor Lewandowsky said.

“The key underlying concept is scepticism. What we showed in the Iraq study was that sceptical people were better able to discount information than non-sceptical people.

“My interest is to learn more about how people should deal with misinformation, how it can be retracted with better effect and whether the type of information – whether it’s linked to our emotions or not – plays a part on our inability to update it with new information.”

#### **MEDIA REFERENCE:**

Professor Stephan Lewandowsky  
Simone Hewett / Francesca Robb  
(UWA Public Affairs)

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