

Nanotechnology's future depends on who the public trusts

February 11 2008

When the public considers competing arguments about a new technology's potential risks and benefits, people will tend to agree with the expert whose values are closest to their own, no matter what position the expert takes. The same will hold true for nanotechnology, a key study has found.

The study results appear in a report issued today by the Project on Emerging Nanotechnologies (PEN). The study was based on experiments involving some 1,600 American adults and was carried out by the Cultural Cognition Project at Yale Law School — an interdisciplinary team of researchers from Yale University, the University of Washington, The George Washington University, Cornell University, and Decision Research in Eugene, Oregon.

As part of the study, participants read opposing arguments that were randomly attributed to fictional policy experts from major universities to form an opinion on nanotechnology — a cutting-edge technology about which little is known by the public.

“Because most people lack the time and expertise necessary to make sense of scientific information on complex and novel risks, they naturally rely on experts whom they trust to determine what information to believe. Individuals are inclined to trust those who share their cultural outlooks,” according to the study's lead author Yale Law School professor Dan Kahan.

The new results are consistent with those from an earlier study — part of an ongoing series being sponsored by the National Science Foundation, PEN and the Oscar M. Ruebahausen Fund at Yale Law School — in which the same researchers found that individuals’ values influence how they respond to information about nanotechnology risks.

The findings reinforce the fact that the task of engaging the U.S. public about nanotechnology will not be simple or easy, PEN Director David Rejeski says.

“This study identifies some of the hurdles policy experts face in developing a comprehensive strategy for providing citizens with information about nanotechnology,” Rejeski says. “It highlights the urgency of talking with the public about nanotechnology now — at this relatively early stage in its commercialization. It also emphasizes the importance of getting information to people that they can trust and from sources they can rely on.”

In the third and final study in this series of experiments, expected to be completed in spring 2008, the Cultural Cognition Project will explore the persuasiveness of different messages coupled with a variety of trusted messengers on various audience groups.

Source: Project on Emerging Nanotechnologies

Citation: Nanotechnology's future depends on who the public trusts (2008, February 11) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2008-02-nanotechnology-future.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.