

Science that threatens a person's 'world view'; can backfire: researcher

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Using evidence to 'back up' science can actually have the reverse psychological effect on some people, according to a researcher at The University of Queensland.

UQ Global Change Institute research fellow John Cook said reporting [evidence](#) that is perceived to threaten a person's view of the world can actually backfire.

“People derive a large part of their sense of identity from their world view, how they see the world. So they react defensively to any information that threatens their world view,” he said.

“What's fascinating, is that new, contradictory evidence can actually cause people to feel stronger in their initial beliefs.”

Mr Cook, the mastermind behind the successful [Skeptical Science website](#), is developing a psychological model that simulates how people react to evidence that threatens their world view. One of the features of the model is that distrust of science is a key factor in the so-called “backfire effect”.

“If you distrust the science that threatens your world view, then more scientific evidence will make you react with suspicion, causing you to double down on your beliefs,” Mr Cook said.

Mr Cook hopes the model will shed light on how people process

information and give way to better, more effective approaches in science communication.

“If distrust in science is a key element to denial, maybe we're better off targeting trust in the science - by explaining the peer-reviewed process and the checks and balances in the scientific method,” he said.

Mr Cook's model, however, predicts that this approach will have minimal impact at the extreme end of the ideological scale.

“When people have extreme views, you can't pull trust one way and world view the other. By and large, world view wins,” he said.

“A better tack is to attempt to reduce the biasing influence of the world view, by showing that [science](#) doesn't threaten it.”

According to Mr Cook's [model](#), this works better when delivered by someone that shares the values of the recipient.

Provided by University of Queensland

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