

Interview Stephan Lewandowsky

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*With great pleasure, we present this exclusive interview with **Stephan Lewandowsky**, one of the most influential voices in contemporary studies of human cognition, misinformation, and the social challenges faced by science in the digital age. A Professor in the School of Psychological Science at the **University of Bristol** (United Kingdom), Lewandowsky has built*

a career distinguished by a rare combination of theoretical rigor, methodological sophistication, and a strong public commitment to defending rationality, democracy, and the integrity of scientific debate. His academic trajectory is internationally recognized: he has authored hundreds of publications in prestigious journals, ranging from computational modeling of memory to investigations of science denial, conspiracy theories, and the public acceptance of scientific evidence. Lewandowsky leads major transnational research projects dedicated to understanding and mitigating the spread of misinformation, examining the impact of digital architectures on human behavior, and identifying emerging threats to individual autonomy and the democratic information space. His contributions also include pioneering

studies on cognitive inoculation, refutational learning, and the persistence of false beliefs—approaches that have become indispensable for researchers examining vaccination hesitancy, climate change denial, and political polarization. In this interview, Lewandowsky revisits several of the defining questions of the twenty-first century: Why do so many people reject robust scientific evidence? How do myths, rumors, and conspiratorial narratives take hold and resist correction? In what ways do algorithms, digital platforms, and emotionally charged content shape our perception of reality? And what paths might we pursue in education, public policy, and the training of new researchers in an age marked by post-truth dynamics and an escalating crisis of information?

1. Considering your extensive body of work on cognition, misinformation, and public acceptance of science, why do so many individuals, a phenomenon particularly critical in countries such as Brazil, continue to reject well-established scientific conclusions, even when confronted with robust evidence on issues like climate change or vaccination? Which cognitive and sociopolitical mechanisms help explain this resistance?

Dr. Stephan Lewandowsky: There are several variables that explain resistance to scientific evidence. Across many countries and contexts, the most important variable has been shown to be people's personal worldview or ideology. There is a lot of evidence that people on political rights are more likely to resist scientific evidence than those on the left. This is readily explainable if you consider the impact of scientific evidence: for

example, the findings from climate science present a strong impetus to change the way we run our economies to make them more sustainable – but that change cannot be achieved without regulation or new policies, or even taxes. And those measures present a serious threat to people on political rights. Similarly, public health measures such as vaccinations or masks work best if they are applied across the board. And that infringes on people's individual choice and hence is again threatening to people on the political right.

2. Your various research projects investigating the spread of misinformation and the persistence of false beliefs reveal a methodologically complex field undergoing rapid transformation. In your assessment, what

are the greatest challenges in studying this phenomenon within such a dynamic digital environment? Could you highlight some of the most significant findings that your investigations have produced so far?

Dr. Stephan Lewandowsky: The greatest challenge researchers are facing right now is the platforms' reluctance – and sometimes outright refusal – to release critical data to researchers. For example, we cannot fully audit platform algorithms to ascertain what they do without access to platform data. Whenever researchers manage to examine the algorithms, the results are very concerning: X is clearly highlighting extreme content (in particular extreme-right material) with demonstrable adverse consequences on people's emotional state.

3. Among the results emerging from your research on fake news and conspiracy theories, which findings do you consider most central to understanding why certain myths persist even after clear corrections? Has anything particularly surprised you throughout these investigations? And, given this landscape, which strategies appear most promising for mitigating the impact of misinformation?

Dr. Stephan Lewandowsky: There are two findings that I think are most important to understand: first, the mere repetition of information makes it appear more truthful, irrespective of its actual truth value. Second, by default people believe everything they hear, and “unsticking” misinformation is difficult. There are two ways to deal with this: the first one is called prebunking or inoculation and consists of telling people how they might be misled before the misinformation is encountered. That has been shown to make them more resilient to being misled. The second is to explain to people after they have been exposed to misinformation why it is incorrect, and to present an alternative view of the world without the misinformation. If you provide an alternative view, people are much more likely to abandon the initial false information.

4. The Oxford Dictionary has recently selected words that reflect contemporary tensions, such as “*rage bait*” in 2025 and “*brain rot*” in 2024, both deeply connected to excessive digital-content consumption, performative outrage, and the erosion of attention. How do you interpret these choices considering your research on misinformation, online information architecture, and behavior on digital platforms?

Dr. Stephan Lewandowsky: I think those terms are pretty good and they capture what is happening online in the attention economy. Human attention is biased towards outrage- and fear-evoking stimuli, and the platforms exploit that to keep people engaged longer so the platforms can make more money.

5. Strategies such as *cognitive inoculation* and *refutational correction* (debunking), widely discussed in your work, have gained prominence as educational tools. In what ways can the field of education, both at the primary/secondary levels and within higher education, integrate these approaches systematically to confront misinformation and strengthen critical thinking?

Dr. Stephan Lewandowsky: I think we need to teach a variety of techniques from early on (i.e., primary school). Among them are the skills to detect misleading rhetoric, to know how to check the veracity of content (e.g., by lateral reading), and perhaps most important, what to ignore. There is far more information out there than human beings can reasonably process and one of the most important skills for the 21st century is to know what to ignore.

6. Drawing on your research on post-truth, polarization, and science denialism, how do you assess the political, social, and ethical implications of this volatile information environment, particularly during moments of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic or in the face of global warming? Are there emerging risks that society still underestimates?

Dr. Stephan Lewandowsky: I think there is sufficient evidence that the online information landscape as it is currently designed and governed presents grave risks to societies – from the effects on the mental health of young people to the undermining of democracy, we are facing numerous risks that must be managed. Many, but sadly not all, politicians and policy makers have recognized this.

7. In your studies on memory and belief revision, you examine how, and under which conditions, people update previously internalized information. How does your research illuminate the processes by which individuals maintain or abandon false beliefs when confronted with corrections? And in what ways do fake news and conspiratorial narratives help us understand when this updating process fails?

Dr. Stephan Lewandowsky: There is a fundamental difficulty that humans have

in processing corrections and even simple negations. For example, if I describe someone as “not tall” than people have more difficulty making sense of that than when I describe the same person as “short”. This has nothing to do with conspiracy theories or misinformation; it is simply an attribute of what it means to be human. However, that difficulty is put on steroids through misinformation because people find it difficult to process the fact that something is false – they may know it’s false but will still rely on the information in other contexts because a correction does not make it disappear.

8. Your work integrates cognitive psychology, communication science, and social studies of technology within a highly interdisciplinary perspective. If you were to advise young researchers on which emerging themes in these fields are likely to gain prominence in the coming years, which would you highlight, and why?

Dr. Stephan Lewandowsky: I think big-data and network analyses will become increasingly prominent, and so skills that combine knowledge of complex systems with cognitive science would be very attractive.

9. You have coordinated and participated in numerous international projects involving multidisciplinary teams and socially consequential topics. What recommendations would you offer for young scholars who wish to enter the realm of transnational research and participate in large-scale collaborative projects?

Dr. Stephan Lewandowsky: I have always been very open in my interactions with other people and have enjoyed talking to researchers and sharing my data and ideas. For me, this has paid off tremendously. At the same time, I have also learned to become resilient to criticism, especially from people who are opposing my work for ideological reasons. That comes with the territory: if you do work that matters, then some people will attack it because your evidence is inconvenient for their profits or political agendas.

10. Your career includes an impressive volume of publications in high-impact journals, as well as widely cited books and book chapters. What guidance would you offer to young researchers aiming to build a consistent and high-impact academic trajectory? And, drawing from your mentoring experience, what qualities do you value most in master's and doctoral

students who wish to work under your supervision?

Dr. Stephan Lewandowsky: My advice would be to strive for quality, even if it is hard and takes longer. For me, the most important qualities of students are, first, natural curiosity and the motivation to pursue things, and second, having quantitative skills (i.e., statistics, programming, IT generally). You also need to be organized and disciplined and meticulous, which means writing things down and being able to plan meetings and so on. But at the heart of it all there must be motivation and curiosity. Science is not a job, it's a passion.