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NEWS

How we support our false beliefs

By PATRICIA DONOVAN

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In a study published in the most recent issue of the journal *Sociological Inquiry*, sociologists from four major research institutions focus on one of the most curious aspects of the 2004 presidential election: the strength and resilience of the belief among many Americans that Saddam Hussein was linked to the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

Although this belief influenced the 2004 election, they claim it did not result from pro-Bush propaganda, but from an urgent need by many Americans to seek justification for a war already in progress.

The findings may illuminate reasons why some people form false beliefs about the pros and cons of health care reform or regarding President Obama's citizenship, for example.

The study, "There Must Be a Reason: Osama, Saddam and Inferred Justification," calls such unsubstantiated beliefs "a serious challenge to democratic theory and practice," and considers how and why it was maintained by so many voters for so long in the absence of supporting evidence.

"Our data shows substantial support for a cognitive theory known as 'motivated reasoning,' which suggests that rather than search rationally for information that either confirms or disconfirms a particular belief, people actually seek out information that confirms what they already believe," says co-author Steven Hoffman, UB visiting assistant professor of sociology.

"In fact," he says, "for the most part people completely ignore contrary information."

The study, he explains, demonstrates voters' ability to develop elaborate rationalizations based on faulty information.

While numerous scholars have blamed a campaign of false information and

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Steven Hoffman
Visiting Assistant
Professor of Sociology

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innuendo from the Bush administration, this study argues that the primary cause of misperception in the 9/11-Saddam Hussein case was not the presence or absence of accurate data, but a respondent's desire to believe in particular kinds of information.

"The argument here is that people get deeply attached to their beliefs," Hoffman says.

"We form emotional attachments that get wrapped up in our personal identity and sense of morality, irrespective of the facts of the matter. The problem is that this notion of 'motivated reasoning' has only been supported with experimental results in artificial settings. We decided it was time to see if it held up when you talk to actual voters in their homes, workplaces, restaurants, offices and other deliberative settings."

The survey and interview-based study was conducted by Hoffman; Monica Prasad, assistant professor of sociology at Northwestern University; Northwestern graduate students Kieren Bezila and Kate Kindleberger; Andrew Perrin, associate professor of sociology at University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill; and UNC graduate students Kim Manturuk, Andrew R. Payton and Ashleigh Smith Powers (now an assistant professor of political science and psychology at Millsaps College).

The study addresses what it refers to as a "serious challenge to democratic theory and practice that results when citizens with incorrect information cannot form appropriate preferences or evaluate the preferences of others."

One of the most curious "false beliefs" of the 2004 presidential election, they say, was a strong and resilient belief among many Americans that Saddam Hussein was linked to the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Hoffman says that over the course of the 2004 presidential campaign, several polls showed that majorities of respondents believed that Saddam Hussein was either partly or largely responsible for the 9/11 attacks, a percentage that declined very slowly, dipping below 50 percent only in late 2003.

"This misperception that Hussein was responsible for the Twin Tower terrorist attacks was very persistent, despite all the evidence suggesting that no link existed," Hoffman says.

The study team employed a technique called "challenge interviews" on a sample of voters who reported believing in a link between Saddam and 9/11. The researchers presented the available evidence of the link, along with the evidence that there was no link, and then pushed respondents to justify their opinion on the matter. For all but one respondent, the overwhelming evidence that there was no link left no impact on their arguments in support of the link.

One unexpected pattern that emerged from the different justifications that subjects offered for continuing to believe in the validity of the link was that it helped citizens make sense of the Bush Administration's decision to go to war against Iraq.

“We refer to this as ‘inferred justification,’” says Hoffman “because for these voters, the sheer fact that we were engaged in war led to a post-hoc search for a justification for that war.

“People were basically making up justifications for the fact that we were at war,” he says.

“One of the things that is really interesting about this, from both the perspective of voting patterns but also for democratic theory more generally, Hoffman says, “is that we did not find that people were being duped by a campaign of innuendo so much as they were actively constructing links and justifications that did not exist.

“They wanted to believe in the link,” he says, “because it helped them make sense of a current reality. So voters’ ability to develop elaborate rationalizations based on faulty information, whether we think that is good or bad for democratic practice, does at least demonstrate an impressive form of creativity.”

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