In the news

SCANNING POLITICS

The *New York Times* recently published an Op-Ed article written by a group of neuroscientists, neuromarketing researchers and a public policy expert. It described how the brains of 20 swing voters in the USA responded (as measured by functional MRI) to pictures of, and speeches by, US presidential candidates (*New York Times*, 11 November 2007).

A number of eminent cognitive neuroscientists wrote in response that they were “distressed by the publication of research in the press that has not undergone peer review, and that uses flawed reasoning to draw unfounded conclusions about topics as important as the presidential election.” (*New York Times*, 14 November 2007.)

Writing in the Neuroethics and Law Blog, Marta Farah of the University of Pennsylvania, USA, commented that “the idea that functional brain images are more susceptible to fakery than many other kinds of scientific evidence is debatable.” (http://kolber.typepad.com/ethics_law_blog/2007/11/this-is-your-br.html) Nevertheless, Farah was skeptical about the data because they were not validated; interpreting such data might result in ‘just so’ stories. Moreover, a study that uses brain imaging might be perceived by the general public as “more ‘scientific’ and perhaps even more ‘objective’” than studies using, for example, questionnaires, neither of which is necessarily the case. (<http://kolber.typepad.com>, 12 November 2007)

Ben Goldacre agreed in his blog on the *Guardian* website: “...it’s tempting to over-extrapolate, selling activation locations as supporting your favoured hypothesis, while ignoring all kinds of alternative interpretations.” (*Guardian*, 17 November 2007.)

Political campaigners might find the *New York Times* article useful and use the findings to fine-tune their strategies. However, until the findings have been published in a peer-reviewed journal, it seems that the best way to find out which candidate voters prefer is by counting ballots.

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