

Questions the public asks of science

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What does the public expect of scientists today? To what questions does it want answers? Is it looking for an understanding of Nature and of the Universe? Or are more down-to-earth questions about the environment or about the human body and its malfunctions considered more important? And is the public interested in the way research is organised, who funds it and how is its activity socially controlled? Or is it only interested in the practical consequences of science and technology?

To answer such questions, the Centre National de la Recherche Française (CNRS), the French national research organisation, has asked us to carry out a number of studies over the past couple of years : a qualitative study, by interview, of public perceptions of present day science, which allowed us to define a number of characteristic questions. These were then put into a survey (run by D. Boy, Cevipof), providing a quantitative measure of the relative importance of each one. Scientists belonging to the CNRS were then interviewed to determine how prepared they were to answer such questions. Finally, and most recently, scientific journalists were questioned about their vision of scientific communication and of the CNRS as a source. The principal results of these studies will be presented, and we shall show that the situation is evolving, that public demands are changing and that scientists are not always fully prepared to satisfy them.