Europeans, science and technology: Main results of Eurobarometer 55.2 (December 2001)

Some technical data

- Eurobarometer[1] 55.2
- A total of 16 029 people were questioned between 10 May and 15 June 2001. Representative sample of the national population aged 15 and over in each Member State, with an average of some 1 000 people per Member State, except in Germany (1 000 in the new Länder and 1 000 in the former Länder), in the United Kingdom (1 000 in Great Britain and 300 in Northern Ireland) and in Luxembourg (600)
- Plans to carry out same survey in candidate countries in 2002

General trends

- Overall positive perception of science and technology (despite recent crises and the fact that science is also perceived as a kind of Pandora's box)
- Compared with 1992[2] the average scientific literacy[3] is stable
- Europeans have high expectations about science and technology but...
- Science and technology are no longer considered a panacea for a series of problems
- Interest in science slightly lower, in relative terms, than in 1992 (sport scored higher than science)

A gap between science and society

- 45% of Europeans feel they are neither interested nor informed about science and technology
- Two thirds feel not well informed

[1] The Eurobarometer surveys, or more exactly the "Eurobarometer standard reports" have been carried out since 1973 (EB N° 0) for the former Directorate-General X of the European Commission, now the Press and Communication Directorate-General.

[2] The previous Eurobarometer on "Europeans, science and technology" was carried out by the Commission in 1992.

[3] There are however 2 questions which were better answered in 2001 compared with 1992: "Did the earliest humans live at the same time as the dinosaurs?" (+9.4%) and "Do antibiotics kill viruses as well as bacteria?" (+3.7%).

Science and the medias

- Scientific and technological developments are often presented too negatively (36.5% agree)
- Most journalists dealing with scientific topics do not have the appropriate background or training to do so (53.3% agree)
- I rarely read articles related to science and technology (60.6% agree)

The public and the scientists

- Scientists have a strong but ambiguous image (knowledge is power!). Europeans are divided on the issue of scientists' responsibility: 42.8% agree and 42.3% disagree with the statement « Scientists are responsible for the misuse of their discoveries by other people»
- Demand for reinforced control: 80,3% feel « the authorities should formally oblige scientists to respect ethical standards »
- BSE: industry is taking most of the blame. 74.3% say the agro-food industry is the main responsible
- Crises can strengthen science and its image, as well as the image of public research. Scientists have been called in and they will be the ones to repair the damage. Crises of this kind can also strengthen science and its image, as well as the image of public research underpinning this kind of work

A specific case: GMOs

- With regards to genetically modified food, 94.6% want to have the right to choose
- 59.4% say «GMOs may have negative effects on the environment»
- No “knowledge/education effect”: although it is generally observed that the more knowledge people have the more favourable they are to scientific and technological progress. This not true with GMOs. People interviewed could have a high level of knowledge and still believe that biotechnologies should be subject to more control and demand more safety studies, etc.
- In this case information is not enough and could even be counter-productive

Science and the young people

- The perception of science is no better or worse among young people than among the public as a whole
- According to the people interviewed, causes for declining interest in scientific studies and careers are as follows: science classes at school not sufficiently appealing (59.5%); scientific subjects too difficult (55.0%); young people less interested in scientific subjects (49.6%); career prospects not sufficiently appealing (42.4%)
- 60.3% of Europeans feel «the authorities should try to resolve this situation»

Support to European research

- How to improve European research? Develop co-operation between researchers (84.1%); better co-ordinate research (80.4%); improve co-operation between public research and industry (78.7%).
- Enlargement is considered as positive for both candidate countries (62.7%) and current Member States (53.3%)