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Is There a Crisis of Confidence in Science?

Scientists have repeatedly expressed concern that there is a crisis of confidence in science. There are some good reasons for concern, but all too often the conclusion that there is a crisis of confidence is based on only part of the evidence. If one considers only the respondents to opinion polls who have a "great deal" of confidence in science, claims of a crisis seem warranted. Throughout the 1970's, according to the Louis Harris and National Opinion Research Center surveys, much less than a majority of Americans reported a great deal of confidence, a marked contrast to the 56 percent in 1966 who had such a high level of trust.

However, to conclude that this means there is a crisis of confidence ignores other facts. The 1970's have seen a gradual improvement in the percentage with great confidence, from 32 percent in 1971 to 41 percent in 1977. The earlier shift was not from great confidence to little confidence; no more than 10 percent at any time during the 1970's reported hardly any or no confidence. Furthermore, similar fluctuations in confidence have been reported for all major institutions, including religion, and science has generally fared better than most.

Those concerned about a confidence crisis typically assume that the public has lost interest in knowing about science and technology. Recent newspaper readership studies at the Newspaper Advertising Bureau challenge this assumption as well. In 1971, 47 percent of a wide range of listed newspaper topics had a greater readership than the category of science and invention. In 1977, only 26 percent of the same topics received higher reader interest ratings than science and invention. Energy problems headed the list of topics that were very interesting to readers, and health, social problems, and environment were among the most interesting topics.

In the 1977 readership study the national sample of adults were also asked how much space they would give to 34 different subjects if they could tailor a newspaper to suit their own interests. Even though science was not on the list of subjects, the results are instructive for scientists as well as editors. Health, nutrition, and environment were among the subjects that would be given "a lot of" space in a tailor-made paper. Articles on mysterious events, psychic predictions, astrology, and horoscopes were near or at the bottom of the list. Religion fell in the middle range. Furthermore, both young and older adults would give a great deal of space to health and nutrition. Those under 30 gave more space to environmental issues than did older persons, but were no more likely than older persons to give as much space to astrology, mysterious events, and psychic predictions.

These data do not indicate a breakdown in the social acceptance of science. On the other hand, knowledge of the public's understanding of science is too limited to justify firm answers to questions about public appreciation of science. It has now been two decades since the last major survey of the public's understanding took place, so we should not be surprised by the disparate opinions about what is going on among citizens.

Meanwhile, the meager data available suggest several general conclusions: (i) ambivalence, not rejection, best describes public attitudes; (ii) science is of considerable interest to Americans, but the scientific community should, when possible, relate science increasingly to problems of health, environment, energy, and society in order to maintain and expand this interest; and (iii) scientists and funding sources should encourage communication of science through the media (fewer science-related items appear in newspapers than the interest ratings indicate should be there, and only 11 percent of the daily newspapers in the nation have science editors).—CLYDE Z. NUNN, *Senior Project Director, Newspaper Advertising Bureau, Inc., 485 Lexington Avenue, New York 10017*