

In the Society & Genomics Newsletter (nr. 6, October 2005). The following article was published. Remark made by editor: The inquiry used in this article is not representative for a general public.

The importance of public communication

“Public communication”, according to the visitors of the Genomics Momentum 2005, is the major issue raised by genomics research. At least 24% of the 750 guests participated in a short survey, carried out by CSG (Centre for Society and Genomics).

Genomics Momentum is a yearly event, organized by the Netherlands Genomics Initiative. It is visited by the genomics research community, industry, NGO's and government representatives. At the entrance of the 2005 event (The Hague, 5 October), CSG carried out a survey among 180 respondents. CSG—staff members and researchers asked the visitors which societal question or societal problem, raised by genomics, they think is most important or most pressing.

According to 23 % of respondents, public communication was the main issue. Typical answers were: “*Genomics research has to deal with a reluctant public*” and “*We have to create public understanding to reduce fear and to gain trust.*” The remaining answers also were very diverse. Health was the second best theme. Some respondents indicated that genomics will make mankind healthier, happier and older: “*Our health will benefit from genomics research*”. Others wondered if genomics really improves the quality of life, raising questions about privacy, the boundaries of research, “*How far can we go*”, and genetic discrimination.

Some could not seem to think of any societal question or problem raised by genomics, or had never thought about the subject. Others claimed to see no societal problems at all. Overall (although, the sample was not representative) the visitors seemed to be just as varied in their opinions as the general public.

Later that day, during the lunch break, CSG asked visitors to respond to a set of statements by means of a polling device. How important public communication is considered to be was confirmed by this voting process. 86% of the voters disagreed with the statement that it is pointless to bother the public with societal consequences of genomics. It seems that public education and information is still seen as *the* solution to close the gap between science and society. 42% of the voters were beta-researchers; 17% had an Industrial background; 16% were social scientists. NGO's and the government represented the smallest group, with respectively 2% and 5%.

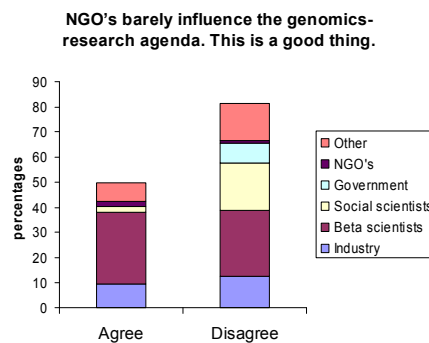


Figure 1. Voting results, divided by discipline

Figure 1 represents the voting results on the statement: *NGO's barely influence the genomics-research agenda. This is a good thing.* A total of 132 people cast their votes on this statement. The majority of the voters disagreed (61%), 39% agreed. Striking is the difference between the beta-scientists, industry and the social-scientists. 89% of the social scientist disagreed on this statement. Half of the beta-scientists and 43% of the industry agreed. 100% of government representatives disagreed and two third of the NGO's agreed (the latter seems surprising but here, the results can not be trusted as only three NGO's were represented in this round of voting).

Finally, 85% of the voters agreed with the statement 'the societal consequences of genomics are still unknown'. At the end of the day, Annemiek Nelis, deputy director of CSG, concluded: “This means there is still a major task for the CSG to do: to better understand the interaction between society and genomics. Public communication and education will not be enough to create understanding and support. We will always meet different views about genomics, both within science and among different publics.”

For more information: www.society-genomics.nl