

Nanotechnology and synthetic biology: What does the American public think?

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Nanotechnology and synthetic biology continue to develop as two of the most exciting areas of scientific discovery, but research has shown that the public is almost completely unaware of the science and its applications. A groundbreaking poll of 1,001 American adults conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates and the Project on Emerging Nanotechnologies (PEN) found that 90 percent of Americans think the public should be better informed about the development of cutting-edge technologies.

"Historically, government and industry have done a poor job of informing and engaging the public about scientific developments that could have transformative impacts on society," said David Rejeski, director of PEN. "The poll showed that better communication is needed and could be beneficial in securing the promise of our investments in science."

The poll, which was conducted by the same firm that produces the well-known NBC News/Wall Street Journal polls, revealed that the proportion of adults who say they have heard a lot or some about [synthetic biology](#) more than doubled in the past year (from 9 percent to 22 percent). Awareness of [nanotechnology](#) (30 percent have heard a lot or some) increased slightly since last year, putting it back at the same level measured in 2006.

"Public awareness of nanotechnology has barely moved in over four years of our project's polling, despite billions of dollars of investment in

research and a growing number of nano-enabled products in the marketplace," said Andrew Maynard, chief science advisor for PEN. "Clearly, the message about this new and important technology is not reaching the public."

The survey showed that the area of application is a decisive factor in shaping public attitudes towards synthetic biology. Over half the respondents supported research in synthetic biology aimed at the development of more efficient biofuels even after being informed of the potential risks and benefits of this application.

However, poll respondents harbored concerns about potential risks associated with the development of synthetic biology. Two-thirds of the participants supported regulation of this emerging technology.

"Regardless of their awareness of synthetic biology, or where they come down on the risk-benefit tradeoff, a strong majority of adults think this research should be regulated by the federal government," said Geoff Garin, president of Peter D. Hart Research Associates.

More information: A report which summarizes the findings of the poll can be found at www.nanotechproject.org/news/archive/hart4/

Source: Project on Emerging Nanotechnologies

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