

Do scientists understand the public?

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Scientific advances often provoke deep concern on the part of the public, especially when these advances challenge strongly held political or moral perspectives.

An American Academy of Arts and Sciences' project on Improving the Scientific Community's Understanding of Public Concerns about Science and Technology examined the ways in which scientists engage with the public, and how their mutual understanding could be improved. More than fifty scientists, engineers, public policy experts, lawyers, [ethicists](#), and journalists participated in a series of workshops that focused on four areas of public concern: the siting of nuclear waste repositories; the spread of personal genetic information; the next generation of the Internet; and the risks and benefits of emerging energy technologies. Several common themes emerged:

- Scientists and the public both share a responsibility for the divide. Scientists and technical experts sometimes take for granted that their work will be viewed as ultimately serving the public good. Members of the public can react viscerally and along ideological lines, but they can also raise important issues that deserve consideration.
- Scientific issues require an "anticipatory approach." A diverse group of stakeholders — research scientists, [social scientists](#), public engagement experts, and skilled communicators — should collaborate early to identify potential scientific controversies and

the best method to address resulting public concerns.

- Communications solutions differ significantly depending on whether a scientific issue has been around for a long time (e.g., how to dispose of nuclear waste) or is relatively new (e.g., the spread of personal [genetic information](#)). In the case of longstanding controversies, social scientists may have had the opportunity to conduct research on public views that can inform communication strategies. For emerging technologies, there will be less reliable analysis available of [public attitudes](#).

In *Do Scientists Understand the Public?*, a new paper based on the Academy study, science journalist Chris Mooney reviews the workshop findings and recommendations. The monograph is available online at <http://www.amacad.org/publications/scientistsUnderstand.aspx>.

According to Mooney, Scientists and the public often have "very different perceptions of risk, and very different ways of bestowing their trust and judging the credibility of information sources."

"Perhaps scientists are misunderstanding the [public](#)...due to their own quirks, assumptions, and patterns of behavior," says Mooney. Laypeople, meanwhile, tend to "strain their responses to scientific controversies through their ethical or value systems, as well as through their political or ideological outlooks."

Provided by American Academy of Arts and Sciences

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