



SciDev.Net: “More insightful, more accessible, more balanced”

A report on a user survey carried out in November 2010

Scientists who regularly read articles on the SciDev.Net website find that its coverage of the role of science and technology in development is more insightful, more accessible and more balanced than that of other media sources, according to an electronic survey.

The survey, carried out in November 2010, also found that such users consider SciDev.Net considerably better than other frequently referred to sources at reporting on discoveries and innovations that meet the needs of developing countries.

And almost half of those who completed the survey feel that material posted on the SciDev.Net website is more relevant to the needs of their own countries than that provided by other media.

The results emerged from a survey of two categories of SciDev.Net’s registered users: researchers and lecturers/teachers. These users were identified as being best placed to judge the accuracy and authoritativeness of articles appearing on the SciDev.Net website.

The main purpose of the survey was to assess the credibility, accessibility and balance of such articles, and thus the extent to which SciDev.Net is meeting its goal of delivering an “authoritative ... service providing timely news, information and opinion in an accessible manner”.

Participants were asked to judge how they felt that material on the SciDev.Net website compared to that which they consult regularly in the national or international media, or on other relevant websites.

Overall, more than two-thirds (69.3%) of our specialist users felt that we were better than other information sources at selecting discoveries and innovation that addressed the needs of developing countries.

A significant majority (61.8%) of those responding to the survey also felt that we were more insightful than other media sources when discussing the potential implications of scientific discoveries and technological innovations.

In comparison, 29.0% said that they considered the website to be about as insightful as other sources. Only 4.3% said that they felt we were less insightful, and 3.0% said that they had no opinion.

Questioned about the accessibility of the language in which are articles are written, 60.1% said that they considered our news articles to be more accessible than other

sources, and 36.2% said that the level of accessibility was about the same. Only 1.1% of respondents considered our articles to be less accessible.

Users were also asked how balanced they found SciDev.Net's reporting compared to other information sources on controversial issues raised by the social impact of new scientific discoveries or technological innovations.

In response, 55.2% said that they considered our coverage to be more balanced, and 33.7% that the balance was about the same. Only 3.8% said that we were less balanced in our coverage, and 7.3% said that they had no opinion.

Responses to other questions in the survey were as follows:

- 61.2% felt that we were more effective at identifying novel and significant discoveries and innovations, over twice as many as those who felt that our effectiveness was about the same as other media sources (29.9%).
- 45.3% of respondents felt that our news coverage of subjects with which they were familiar was more reliable than coverage by other sources, and 47.9% that our reliability is about the same.
- 43.9% felt that our material is more relevant than that provided by other sources, and exactly the same proportion (43.9%) that our relevance is about the same.
- 41.6% of respondents felt that we quote more authoritative commentators about the potential importance and impact of a scientific discovery or technological innovation.

More than 370 registered users of SciDev.Net replied to the questionnaire, which was promoted in emails sent out in November 2010 to English-speaking registered users who had indicated when they signed up that they were researchers, lecturers or teachers.

Almost three quarters (74.6%) of respondents were over the age of 35, with the highest proportion (40.4%) being between the ages of 50 and 65. More than three-quarters (75.7%) were male.

In terms of the geographical distribution of respondents, the highest number (27.5%) came from Sub-Saharan Africa. 22.4% came from South Asia — where SciDev.Net has a particularly strong following in India — and 16.7% from Latin America and the Caribbean.

The highest proportion of respondents (59.8%) described themselves as working for a higher education institution, with 23.2% working for government research institutions, and 6.8% for private research institutions.

In terms of scientific disciplines, by far the largest professional category of specialist regular users was biologists (27.1%). Other scientific disciplines were represented as follows:

- Environmental science 12.3%
- Biomedical science 11.5%
- Social science 10.7%
- Chemistry 4.9%
- Physics 3.8%
- Geology 1.6%

In addition, 28.1% of respondents identified themselves as belonging to “other” disciplines, in particular to other branches of the agricultural and health sciences.

Overall, 256 other sources of scientific and technology information were identified by respondents, ranging from generic mentions of ‘journals’ to specific publications.

The Internet was the most popular source of information, identified by 127 respondents. This was followed by journals (126), books (33), newspapers (29) and international organisations (24). In terms of specific journals, *Nature* was mentioned by 23 respondents and *Science* by 18.

Finally the survey included an open-ended question asking for additional comments about how SciDev.Net’s coverage compared to that of other media sources that are available in the respondent’s country.

Some of the responses were as follows:

- “[I] always find something new that I had not read about in other publications.”
- “I like SciDev.Net because it gives me a briefing of breaking news and things are presented in a reader-friendly language. My other sources are more ‘hardcore’ science and it is hard to find the time to browse those thousands of tables of contents to learn what is happening.”
- “I love it! It is thorough, approachable, informative, and the good grace of not being too academic!”
- “It is probably the only source of techno-scientific information on developing countries presented in compact and easily accessible form.”
- “I was thrilled when I first discovered SciDev.Net, and I can’t imagine being without it as a source of information nowadays.”
- “SciDev.Net is an excellent site (and for me the only one) that brings together current information and research on development issues. No other site has anything near a similar amount and diversity of current information, research and opinion.”

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