

**"Bioscienze: rischi, etica, società"**  
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Dr. Halldor Stefansson is a social anthropologist by training. He received his university education in Copenhagen, Denmark, Paris, France, and Osaka, Japan. For fifteen years he did research and was a Professor of anthropology at Osaka Gakuin University in Japan before taking up his present position as the head of the Science and Society Program at the European Molecular Biology Laboratory in Heidelberg, Germany. The aim of the initiative that he leads is to improve communication and mutual understanding between the EMBL scientific community and the public. We estimate that the life sciences have an enormous potential for further development in the twenty-first century. However, a broad popular consensus needs to be developed around questions of how to assess and deal with the diverse repercussions of that development. Our efforts at the EMBL are motivated by such concerns.

**Abstract:**

**Life sciences, the mass-media, and the public**

Accompanying the development and expansion of the biochemical/biological sciences into the 'life sciences' during the last quarter of the twentieth century the public, its elected representatives, and gradually also growing number of practicing scientists themselves, all adopted a new notion of what these sciences were all about. They came to regard the 'raison d'être' of this new front-runner field among the sciences as lying in its ability to affect, positively or negatively, the quality of life in modern societies. The sensibilities and reactions of the general public towards applications of the life sciences have showed themselves to vary from the most enthusiastic reception to violent rejection. Some see them as dangerously invasive, others as fabulously emancipating. These trends towards diametrically opposed responses reflect the profound impact that the life sciences have had on people's world-view and value system in the present era. Political alignments are now increasingly forged and articulated through opposing visions of the nature of the animate world. Some currents of popular sentiments have merged into mass-movements for the protection of 'the sanctity of life', 'the inviolability of species boundaries', 'human dignity', etc. This form of collective response has been triggered by the life sciences' explosive eruption outside of the academia. At the same time, the 'silent majority' in modern societies has increasingly come to adopt the life sciences' world-view of 'the unity of life', and of 'the universality of basic biological processes'.

This is where the media comes in reflecting and reinforcing the above-mentioned bi-polar trends. The mass-media is beset by two sorts of competition: an internal one between colleagues covering different areas of <newsworthiness>, and an external one between news agencies for <the scoop effect>. Both sorts of competitions breed exaggeration and hyperbole. In fact the new clashes of different values and world-views that have accompanied the expansion of the life sciences are ideally fit to benefit the commercial mass media. The mass media is all about identifying, framing, and selling information and entertainment, and 'bad news' is at least as valuable commodity to the mass media as 'good news'. Consequently, the image of the life sciences that the mass-media offers the public is the one of a Manichean world of good and evil, miracles and disasters, breakthroughs and flops, the safe or the dangerous.