

Reader survey

Weisskopf, 'the public and the press are sceptical about fundamental science.' 'The scientific community is partially to blame,' he continues. 'We did not fulfil our task of explaining the beauty, depth and significance of fundamental research.'

'There are few good journalists in the field, and even they only know this science second-hand,' he affirms. 'As well as communicating new developments, the task is to explain difficult concepts of the past, such as quantum mechanics and relativity, even Maxwell's equations and thermodynamics.'

Meanwhile nationalism and over-specialization are taking their toll. To counteract this increasing 'materialistic' attitude, 'scientists have a duty to do more than we ever did before to help,' Weisskopf maintains, 'using public talks, books, articles, TV, media, and educational programmes to explain the scientific message and convey the emotional appeal of a deep familiarity with the way nature works. Much more must be done to show what science really is and how everything is interrelated.'

'Fundamental science is at the roots of applied science,' he concludes. 'Cut the roots and the tree will wither. Science needs basic research stimulated by curiosity. Science cannot develop unless it is pursued for the sake of pure knowledge and insight.'

Many thanks to the hundreds of people who took the time to reply to the CERN Courier readership survey questionnaire published in our May issue.

Bringing out a monthly journal is a lonely business. Issue after issue goes out, and the only response is when there's an occasional factual error. Send out a readership survey and a faint echo comes back.

Most striking was the sheer enthusiasm of the replies. Despite the current erosion of support in the US (see page 2), subatomic physics has significant world-wide box-office appeal.

Most important was to find out who our readers are. 61% of the replies came from Europe, 21% from the USA, 14% from elsewhere (including the former Soviet Union), and 4% from inside CERN.

Not surprisingly, the main audience (37%) is in the high energy physics sector. Then comes teaching (31%), followed closely by accelerators operations and design (12%) and industry (11%).

Apart from detailed breakdowns of readership and feedback on the journal's content and style, the replies revealed several major features. Firstly, the CERN Courier is widely read and appreciated. There are a lot of people outside the immediate research field who want to keep broadly up to date with the latest developments in high energy physics and related fields, without getting too involved in details. It was gratifying to receive replies from far-flung places (Nepal, Indonesia,...), and learn how much distant readers appreciate getting such regular information. 'It helps us feel part of the world scene,' was a typical such reply, from Australia. Despite jet airplanes, fax and electronic mail, our planet is still big.

As well as being geographically far-flung, the readership spans a wide area of science. Researchers from many fields (solid-state, computing, astronomy, environment,...) regularly read these columns.

Opinion on coverage of physics, accelerators, Europe, the US, people and conferences all peaked around 'just right'. The only sector readers didn't think is 'just right' is books. More of that later.

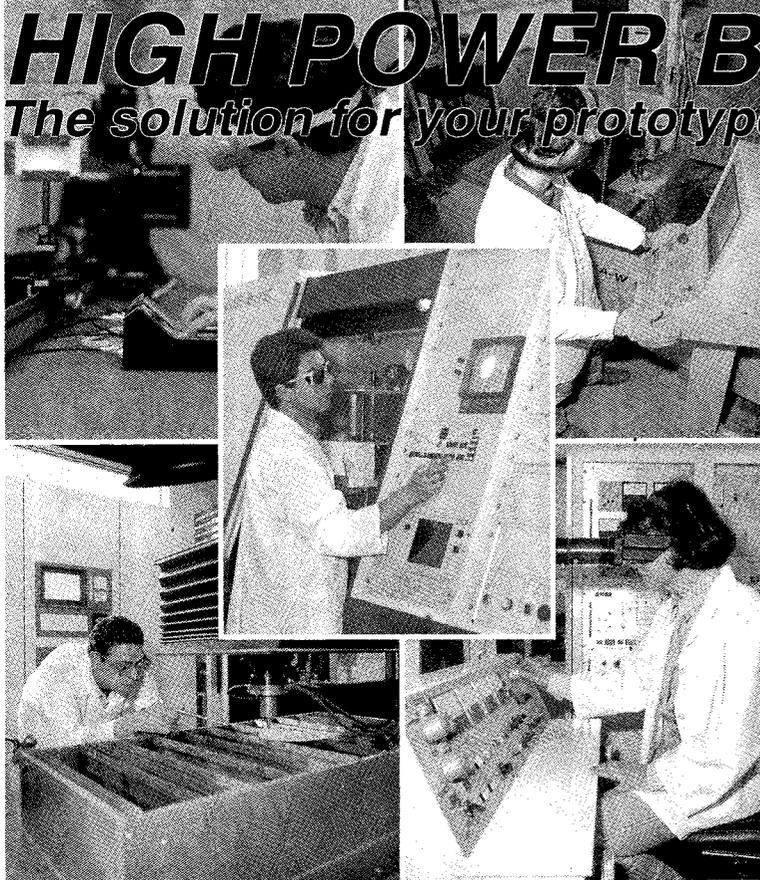
63% of the replies thought physics review coverage is 'just right'. However 31% of the replies, mainly from outside research centres directly involved in this research, said they would appreciate having more explanations. Some people said they want to be reminded of what the Standard Model or quantum chromodynamics is all about, and to have more 'review-type' material.

Our apologies to these stoic readers. But just as a stock market summary for a financial newspaper cannot step back every time and explain to non-specialists what a 'future' or an 'option' is, and sometimes has to go 'long' on jargon, likewise the CERN Courier is aiming at a particular audience and cannot overindulge in continual parentheses. However an important aspect of any newspaper is to provide explanation and background, usually on feature pages or in weekend editions. This aspect of the CERN Courier has been underexploited, and we will make an effort to provide more of this material. For those eager for background information, there are many books on the market these days which admirably complement our news coverage.

On the book front, almost 50% of replies thought there are not enough book reviews. For replies from Europe, this figure was even higher, while 51% of US replies said that

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book coverage was OK. Do Europeans really read more books? Or do they want long reviews to be able to talk knowledgeably about them without actually investing in a copy?

More surprising was the number of readers who complained about the volume of advertising we carry. Like commercial TV, the CERN Courier comes for free, all paid for by this advertising. Others found the advertising content interesting and considered it an intrinsic part of the journal!

We specifically asked canvassed opinion on the coverage of the European and the US scenes separately. This was a 'trick' question designed to reveal latent jingoism, allegations of which sometimes reach the Editor's desk.

However the result did not change significantly. Both European and US readers thought that coverage of both geographical areas is balanced. However the 'too little US coverage' contingent did increase from 14% worldwide to 20% on the basis of US replies alone.

In the additional comments, enlightened US readers said that they understood the magazine's commitment to CERN affairs and were prepared to discount it in their reading. (International readers accept a similar natural home bias in major US weekly newsmagazines.)

Likewise analysing replies by job area maintained the 'just right' look (outside the book sector). Two-thirds of the accelerator community replies thought that accelerators got the right sort of coverage.

Two-thirds of all explicit comments were complimentary, the most frequent being 'a good source of information', 'interesting journal', 'enjoy reading it', 'excellent', 'well done', etc. Just over half the US replies contained such explicit comments, while this figure dropped

to 37% for European replies. The most frequently encountered criticism was the volume of advertising.

This, for the reasons stated above, we ignore, and was anyway almost balanced by an enthusiastic pro-ad faction.

Despite this pat on the back, the CERN Courier cannot wallow in complacency. High standards have to be maintained, and interest maintained in the face of possible stagnation due to an all-conquering Standard Model.

Our thanks to Teresa Oliveira for her enthusiastic processing of all the replies, and to Dorothee Duret for writing the software.

Many readers also took the opportunity to ask for their addresses to be updated. No problem, but this could only be put into the pipeline once the replies had been processed, so it might take some time.

The Editor

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