



**COMETS**  
CNRS Ethics Committee

**OPINION n°1996-02**

**« COMETS REPORT ON KNOWLEDGE DISSEMINATION »**

Approved at plenary session of march 1996



## SUMMARY

1. Knowledge is gradually built up over time, refined and nuanced, diversified and specialised, relativised and generalised at the same time. Mistakes and crises are part of its fabric. Therefore, it intrinsically - albeit often implicitly - encapsulates considerations on the criteria governing its objectivity, on the notions of true and false, certain and uncertain, experience, reality, intuition and demonstration, etc. It also encompasses a gamble on its immediate or future usefulness, thus broadening deliberations to include both its technological implementation and questions pertaining to its relationship with society. These questions cut across education, economics, politics, ecology, sociology, law, ethics, etc. to varying degrees.

2. Knowledge is thus built up against a backdrop of scientific issues and methodical or philosophical questions that are more or less easy to identify if not to address, as well as more or less clearly stated socio-political questions that are difficult to resolve without taking priority-defining choices into account. The dissemination of knowledge therefore encompasses at least three dimensions: the dissemination of scientific content, the dissemination of the methodical and epistemological contexts in which this content was developed, and the dissemination of the socio-political issues related to this development. These three dimensions are obviously concomitant and interdependent, but they are also interdependent with a historical perspective that is analogous in all three.

3. It is clear that the dissemination of knowledge does not only aim to transmit information about the latest findings, i.e. to provide information in a sporadic and more or less external, schematic and simplified way on the immediately understandable or "interesting" parts (stemming from their novelty, their paradoxical nature, their potential applications, or their questioning of accepted cultural paradigms and attitudes, for example). It also aims to promote a genuine scientific acculturation of society (taking into account different audiences and different levels of technicality). The goal is firstly to reduce the distance between the "learned" and the layman, in order to avoid too great a divide between the "haves" and "have-nots" of knowledge; and secondly, to help develop a critical mindset and ability to assess matters, thanks to which individuals are able to form their own points of reference for living, thinking, acting and adapting to an environment that is increasingly unstable and incomprehensible. Finally, it aims to ensure that citizens form an informed and responsible opinion on societal issues — whether related to educational, political, economic, ecological, or ethical choices, for example — posed by scientific development and experimentation.

4. Disseminating knowledge is therefore less a matter of the duty to inform than of the task of forging a place for scientific achievements in education and culture. This task falls primarily to scientists themselves, the goal being to improve the very conditions under which scientific information is received. In a "communication society", disseminating knowledge cannot be limited to transmitting information; it is rather a question of establishing active cooperation between the different players, whether they are producing, transmitting or receiving this knowledge.

5. On what foundation should this cooperation be built today?

