

Science and the international public opinion

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On 16 January 2004, the United Nations Secretary-General and Nobel Peace Prize winner Kofi Annan launched a Global Media Aids Initiative, with the aim of convincing the press, radio, television and Internet to join the fight against what has been called the “forgotten disease of the forgotten continent”. Throughout the world, over 40 million people have the Hiv virus. In 2003 there were 5 million new infections and 3 million deaths were caused by Aids. The majority of those infected live in sub-Saharan Africa –the forgotten continent–, and most of them have no access to treatment. Furthermore, the largest part of the people at risk do not have the necessary information to avoid the infection. This is why, in sub-Saharan Africa, Aids is a “forgotten disease”.

Kofi Annan is asking the mass media for a more active involvement in providing the public with information. He places the media among the co-essential elements of disease prevention and treatment.

But he is asking them a little more: to awaken people's consciences and make the fight against Aids a “global social priority”. Clearly, something is left unsaid in the UN Secretary-General's request to the media. Up to now, national and international political institutions have not been able to turn the fight against the spread of Aids in developing countries into a priority on the planet's government's agenda. Only world public opinion, awakened by the media, can change that agenda, and finally make the fight against the Aids health emergency a “global social priority”.

In the meantime, another Nobel Prize winner, the organization Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), has re-launched the 1999 informative world campaign for the access to medicines with new vigour and with special emphasis on anti-Aids drugs. In this case, too, the message is clear: the right to access anti-Aids drugs will become a fact in developing countries only if world public opinion is activated.

At least three comments may be made about the Kofi Annan's and the MSF's initiatives.

Firstly, a new planetary superpower, with a role in world politics, is being increasingly acknowledged: international public opinion.

Secondly, increasing attention is given to this superpower every time a decision has to be made. Even on big issues, such as global health –e.g. Aids– or the environment –e.g. the climate change– which closely concern the scientific community and the politics of science. International public opinion may be said to be becoming one of the authorities behind the decisions affecting politics and science –or, rather, technoscience–. It has been seen in action, and a successful action, during the dispute between a number of multinationals and the South-African government about access to anti-Aids drugs.

Finally, this new planetary superpower is mentioned every time one of the fundamental characteristics of the XVII century “scientific revolution” is evoked: its universalism. There is a single scientific knowledge in the whole *globus mundi*, and this knowledge must be used for the benefit of all men. Not for the benefit of a few.

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