

## Cafés Scientifiques: venues for debate on science

AWARENESS AND DEBATE 2005/2006

### BACKGROUND

Inspired by the French Cafés Philosophiques, Café Scientifique provides a forum for the discussion of a wide range of issues relating to science, technology and society. At its heart is a radical attempt to take scientists out of their natural setting and create an environment where non-scientists can engage as equals. Introduced in Leeds, UK in 1998 by Duncan Dallas, with a Newcastle offering by Tom Shakespeare following in 2000, Café Scientifique events are accessible to members of the general public and invited audiences with an interest in the topic for discussion. The cafés are held around once a month and provide an opportunity to discuss and question how science is being practised, the consequences of scientific research and the wider implications for society. In contrast to formal lectures, events are held in venues outside traditional academic settings, such as in cafés, bars, bookshops and restaurants. Most of them are not run by professional science communicators and embody a true grassroots movement.

Café Scientifique debates have covered a wide variety of existing and emerging scientific issues including: AIDS, evolutionary theory and Darwin, Big Bang theory, DNA, biodiversity, artificial intelligence, cancer, code breaking, global warming and nanotechnology.

Funding for Café Scientifique events has been provided by a range of organisations, including the Royal Society, the British Association and the Wellcome Trust; in 2002 the Wellcome Trust provided funds to support a national coordinator, allowing the network to grow. Many of the cafés also attract a range of local sponsorship and many rely on local volunteers.

### ADVANCE

Café Scientifique was the first and is now the largest worldwide network devoted to the discussion of science. Providing a novel format for exploring and debating science and technology-related issues, there are now 30 cafés in the UK and around 180 worldwide from Japan to Argentina, South Korea to Bangladesh.

The principles of open discussion and debate around science have been adopted by the British Council, which now runs a network of international, 'virtual' Cafés Scientifique. The British Council initiative involves leading scientists presenting an issue by video conference to audiences across countries to facilitate debate around the social, ethical and cultural implications of developments in science.

Given the need to engage future generations in debate about developments in science and technology, Café Scientifique was introduced into schools in France in 2001. The Wellcome Trust awarded funds to help establish a network of 'Junior Cafés' across the UK, including in Manchester, Newcastle and Bath; there are now over 100 Junior Cafés across the UK, France, the USA and beyond.



Above: Café Scientifique at the Photographers' Gallery, London

*Suzanne McDougall*

## HOW IT'S MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Café Scientifique is proving a highly effective way of engaging scientists and the public in open dialogue, helping to bring new perspectives to debates around science and technology. As its founder Duncan Dallas said in 2006, "Café Scientifique is a step toward bringing scientists and the general public together in a friendly environment to discuss the big scientific issues that concern us all." Café events have received extensive local, national and international print and broadcast media coverage. In 2002, Kate Weinberg of *Vogue* magazine wrote: "Café Philosophie and Café Scientifique steer clear of dull theorising by addressing provocative, current issues to an eager young crowd."

## NEXT STEPS

The cafés continue to expand in number and across the world. There have also been developments in their format, including cafés hosted by specific religious communities to consider the compatibility of religious beliefs with developments in science, and the setting up of an internet café TV station to enable audiences across the globe to listen to and potentially participate in events.

Duncan Dallas, founder of the Café Scientifique movement, is planning a world conference of Café Scientifique organisers in 2007. The aim of the conference is to provide a forum for discussion and exchange of ideas about how the cafés are practised in different communities, countries and cultures.

## REFERENCES

[www.cafescientifique.org](http://www.cafescientifique.org)

[www.britishcouncil.org/science-society-cafesci.htm](http://www.britishcouncil.org/science-society-cafesci.htm)

[www.juniorcafesci.org.uk](http://www.juniorcafesci.org.uk)

Dallas D. *Café Scientifique – déjà vu*. Cell 2006;126(2):227–9.

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## TIMELINE OF CAFÉ SCIENTIFIQUE



## TABLE OF ACHIEVEMENTS

Inputs	Key activities/outputs	Outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Royal Society/British Association Millennium Award (1999)</li> <li>Wellcome Trust funding for meeting of Café Scientifique in France (1999)</li> <li>Wellcome Trust Impact Award (2001)</li> <li>Wellcome Trust People Award for first UK Conference in Newcastle (2004)</li> <li>Wellcome Trust Public Engagement Society Activity Award to set up the Junior Café network (2005)</li> <li>Wellcome Trust People Award for World Conference (2006)</li> <li>A range of other local funders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establishment of first Café Scientifique in Leeds (1998) by Duncan Dallas</li> <li>Two themed weeks of meetings/discussions in various cafés in Leeds</li> <li>First Junior Cafés set up in France 1999</li> <li>Set up of new cafés in major cities throughout Britain, e.g. Leeds, Nottingham, Newcastle and Oxford</li> <li>Growth of cafés in USA and worldwide</li> <li>Set up of Junior Cafés in schools in north of England (e.g. Newcastle, Northumberland, Greater Manchester)</li> <li>World conference of Café Scientifique organisers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local and national publicity in the media, e.g. the <i>Guardian</i>, <i>The Big Issue</i>, <i>Nature</i>, <i>Yorkshire Post</i>, Radio Four</li> <li>Coverage in scientific journals: <i>Nature</i>, <i>Cell</i>, <i>Science</i></li> <li>International media coverage: <i>The New York Times</i>, <i>The Japan Times</i></li> </ul>