

GENERAL SCIENCE

Scientific Opinion Polled

Science Service pioneers new method of obtaining and revealing expert scientific opinion on suitable problems by Grand Jury panels.

► A NEW METHOD of collecting and announcing expert opinion on important questions dealing with science and technology has been developed by SCIENCE SERVICE, the institution for the interpretation of science.

To deliberate upon each scientific question considered, a special body of experts upon the particular question is empanelled by mail questionnaire.

Science Service Grand Jury is the name applied to such a panel.

Each member renders his judgment independently and anonymously.

No member of the body of experts polled is referred to by name in the report prepared, but many comments that are offered are summarized or quoted anonymously to enlighten the question.

The character of the panel, the percentage of the experts who reply, the spread of their opinions and other particular statistical data are given in detail.

It is expected that these inquiries will become one of the most important summa-

tions of scientific opinion available to the public.

Those selected as members of these Science Service Grand Juries are assured they will not be identified by name, position or otherwise. They are asked to answer "yes" or "no" to carefully phrased questions, set in a proper framework by a short explanation of the problem considered.

A new Grand Jury panel is selected for each inquiry. For instance, the first inquiry to be announced polled experts on the planet Mars, which is now making its closest approach in many years to the earth. The Mars jury was selected largely from directors of observatories and scientists who have done actual work concerning the planet.

Most of the experts invited to serve have done so, only a few refusing on the grounds that such polls should not be undertaken.

Additional inquiries are underway. Further polls are planned as scientific problems become suitable for such assay.

Science News Letter, September 15, 1956

ASTRONOMY

No Intelligent Life on Mars

► EXPERTS say there is life on the planet Mars. But there is no intelligent life on that ruddy planet.

A panel of experts on Mars, polled by the new Science Service Grand Jury technique, has voted almost unanimously "yes" when asked the question: "Is there any kind of life on Mars?"

With even greater accord, the experts also gave a "no" answer to the question: "Is there any form of intelligent life on Mars?"

The planet, Mars, now easily visible in the southeastern evening sky, made a close approach to earth at midnight EST on Sept. 6, when it was only 35,120,000 miles away, closer than it has been since 1924. Not until 1971 will it come even nearly as close.

SCIENCE SERVICE therefore formed a Grand Jury of 49 experts, mostly astronomers, who have studied or observed Mars, or who head observatories in the United States and Canada. Of these, 75% (37 experts) returned ballots.

On the six questions submitted, positive "yes" or "no" answers were given by 60% to 90% of the panel, depending on the question.

On the "any kind of life" on Mars question, the vote was: yes—26 (70%), no—1

(3%), not voting—10 (27%). On intelligent life on Mars, the vote was reversed: 27 (73%) voting no, 10 (27%) not voting, and no "yes" votes.

There is "a lower form of life, like moss or lichens" on Mars, the experts concluded. The vote was: yes—25 (67%), no—1 (3%), not voting—11 (30%).

The experts would therefore have no expectation of being able to communicate

ASTRONOMY

Man Not Alone in Cosmos

► THERE ARE CREATURES roughly comparable to man in the universe, in the opinion of leading astronomers. Man is not alone. There are other worlds than ours.

This is the case, even though astronomers are practically unanimous in believing that there is no intelligent life on Mars, the planet now making its closest approach to the earth in years.

In a Science Service Grand Jury inquiry, 37 astronomers decided 23 (62%) yes, 1 (3%) no, and 13 (35%) not voting on the question: Is there a probability that

with Mars for there are no intelligent beings there in their opinion. Their predominant opinions that there is a very low order of vegetable life there fits in with what is known about the physical conditions on the ruddy planet.

"Will man ever travel to Mars?" This question was asked the experts. Somewhat surprisingly, many believed that space travel would take human beings to Mars. Two-thirds of those who answered the question believe that there would eventually be travel across interplanetary space to the planet. The vote was: yes—15 (40.5%), no—7 (19%), not voting—15 (40.5%).

One eminent astronomer in his anonymous discussion asked why man should want to go to Mars, saying: "The same amount of money or energy spent on making earth a better place on which to live would do more good." Another commented: "Remotely possible but terrifically expensive." "After many decades," another expert said.

As to travel to Mars, another opinion is: "It is possible but it is an open question whether such a journey will in fact be accomplished. Already rocket development has reached the point where we may reasonably expect the journey to be possible in 50 years, barring self-destruction of humanity."

The Mars experts hesitated over "intelligent" life. "Is there intelligence in an electron with a memory or in a sunflower?" asked one. The canals on Mars indicate intelligent life, another expert said, but the low atmospheric density argued that this life has been extinct for an immense period.

"The earth is suitable as a producer and a home of intelligent life," another astronomer said, "yet did not possess it for 99.997% of its history of 5,000,000,000 years. It is doubtful whether an observer on Venus would have seen the change on the earth produced by man."

Not all of the experts polled approved the method of making such inquiry. One said: "Scientific matters are not settled by counting noses." Another: "Childish and ridiculous." "To collect votes from scientists on any scientific question is misleading and unscientific," another voted.

Science News Letter, September 15, 1956