

FRONTIERS

science journalism initiative

Ethics of journalism in the FRONTIERS project

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Embedded journalism



FRONTIERS CoC - Institutions

1. Access and transparency

- We commit to providing journalists with reasonable access to relevant researchers, facilities, and resources, while respecting any legitimate confidentiality or safety concerns.
- We will be transparent about the institution's research activities, funding sources, and any potential conflicts of interest.

3. Journalistic independence

- We acknowledge and respect the journalist's independence and editorial control over their work.
- We will not attempt to influence the content, tone, or direction of the journalist's inquiry or reporting.

4. Non-interference

- We will not interfere with the journalist's ability to conduct interviews, gather information, or pursue their chosen story angles.
- We will not restrict the journalist's ability to communicate with other researchers, sources, or stakeholders.

5. Ethical science reporting

- We will encourage researchers to communicate their work openly and honestly with the journalist.
- We will support the journalist's efforts to understand complex scientific concepts and accurately report findings.
- We will promote responsible and ethical practices in both research and reporting.

FRONTIERS CoC - Journalists

1. Accuracy and Verification

- I will present all relevant perspectives on scientific issues.
- I will avoid undue influence from personal biases or vested interests.

3. Respect for sources

- I will protect the confidentiality of sources when promised.
- I will give credit to sources for their contributions to my reporting.
- I will maintain editorial independence in my decision-making.

8. Respect for Institutional Norms and Safety

- I will abide by all rules, regulations, and norms of the hosting institution and any research facilities I may access.
- I will follow healthy and safety protocols and guidelines in laboratories and other research environments.
- I will respect the privacy and confidentiality of research data and intellectual property.
- I will seek permission before taking photographs or recording audio or video in research settings.

Case 1

You are spending several hours, almost daily, hanging out and talking to researchers in a laboratory in which some radioactive substances are used routinely as markers. The research group has prepared some “hands on” research activities for you to perform under the supervision of the host scientist, who happens to oversee safety practices for the whole institution, who trained you on safety precautions on the first day. You received a copy of the document listing safety procedures, which is also displayed on a wall by the laboratory entrance, and you have read it carefully and memorized.

After some time, you have become quite confident with the use of micropipettes, until one day you inadvertently pour two small drops of a radioactively tagged biological sample out of the Eppendorf microtube, on the laboratory bench. You immediately alert the researcher, who smiles confidently and tells you not to worry. He cleans the bench with a piece of paper and throws it in the bin, leaving you open-mouthed in amazement.

You have just witnessed a violation of the safety rules, which state that even the smallest amount of radioactive substances must be disposed of with a special procedure.

What do you do?

Case 2

The research team that hosts you has shared with you the excitement for a research paper that they submitted months ago to a well-known top-tier peer-reviewed journal, which was resubmitted after coming back from the last round of reviews with minor revisions. The confirmation of the final acceptance by the editors – which would mean reaching an important goal for the career of many researchers involved – is expected very soon, when one of the researchers in the team asks desperately for help, since her attempts at replicating, for a follow-up research, the main experiment described in the paper failed to produce consistent results.

The whole team tries in vain to understand what went wrong, and at the end of the day someone in the team wonders whether the journal should be immediately informed. At the lab meeting the next morning, the Head of the Laboratory announces that the experiment will be repeated from scratch, which will require a few weeks. Until then, the journal will not be informed.

What do you do?

Part 2 - Conflict of interest



Case 3

You have just won a prestigious grant, supported by the European Commission, for science journalism. The grant requires you to spend a few months in a research facility, with no obligation to provide any coverage.

As a well-established freelance journalist, one of your clients—an editor from a prestigious science journal with a news and feature section—informs you that you will not be allowed to cover anything related to the European Commission for "at least a year, if not longer."

You inquire about the ethical guidelines for science journalists and whether there are any rules for disclosure, but you find that no official document exists. Journalists are simply expected to have no conflicts of interest at all. What do you do?

Classic Col list for scientists / 1

Financial relationships:

- Any funding received from organizations, companies, or individuals that may benefit from the research findings.
- Ownership of stocks, shares, or equity in a company that could be affected by the research.
- Paid consulting roles, advisory board positions, or employment with an entity that has an interest in the research.

Personal relationships:

- Close personal or familial relationships with individuals or organizations that may benefit from the research outcomes.
- Any involvement of family members or close friends in companies or organizations that are tied to the research.

Intellectual property:

- Patents or patent applications, either owned or pending, that relate to the research being published.
- Licensing agreements for intellectual property, such as inventions or technologies, that could be influenced by the research.

Institutional affiliations:

- Affiliations with institutions or organizations that have a stake in the research findings.
- Leadership roles (e.g., board membership, executive positions) in companies or professional organizations that might benefit from the publication.

Classic Col list for scientists / 2

Grants and sponsorship:

- Any research grants or funding from government agencies, private companies, or non-profits that could create a perception of bias.
- Sponsored research where the sponsor has a vested interest in the results.

Non-financial conflicts:

- Strong personal beliefs or ideologies that may bias the interpretation or presentation of the research.
- Involvement in advocacy or lobbying groups that are related to the topic of research.

Collaborations and external influences:

- Collaborations with organizations or individuals who may have a stake in the research results.
- Pressure from external parties (e.g., funders, commercial entities) that could influence how the research is conducted or reported.

Editorial and peer-review conflicts:

- Serving as an editor or peer reviewer for a journal where the research is being published, which could lead to bias or undue influence.
- Any previous personal or professional conflicts with reviewers or editors that could affect the review process.

An example from Medscape.com

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Authors and Disclosures

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Disclosure: Roberta Villa, MD, has disclosed no relevant conflicts of interest.

Perspective > Medscape Family Medicine

COMMENTARY

Peer Review and Scientific Publishing Are Faltering

Roberta Villa, MD

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