

keys and ethical guidelines for researchers to engage in public advocacy, without being regarded as an activist

Eric Guilyardi and Virginie Courtier-Orgogozo

Public advocacy, i.e. the normative public intervention by a researcher drawing authority from their scientific position, raises multiple questions about the fine line between legitimate engagement and perceived activism. Drawing on a CNRS Ethics Committee opinion published recently (COMETS 2023-44), we propose guidelines emphasizing freedom of choice, the explicit acknowledgment of values, and the maintenance of scientific rigor, transparency, and integrity. We argue that advocacy should remain an individual choice, and that researchers must take responsibility for the weight of their public statements, ensuring clarity about their role, expertise, and potential conflicts of interest. Ultimately, safeguarding both freedom of expression and public trust in science requires researchers and institutions to promote responsible advocacy without policing or suppressing it.

Keywords: activism, advocacy, neutrality, Scientific communication, values

Academic researchers have long been public advocates for various causes. Researchers taking normative positions on various societal issues is nothing new. Today, however, given the many challenges facing our society, the issue of public advocacy by researchers has taken on a new dimension. Many academics are involved in advocacy or taking a stand on societal issues, such as the fight against pandemics, environmental degradation, the rise of surveillance technologies, the threats to democracy or the spread of Artificial Intelligence. They do so in a variety of ways, from contributing to the work of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or think tanks, signing opinion editorials (opposite the editorial page (op-eds)), engaging in litigation, writing blog posts or engaging in civil disobedience. In addition, the development of traditional and social media has greatly increased the public visibility of engaged researchers. At the same time, some in the research community, and even beyond, are questioning the modalities of such forms of public advocacy, their appropriateness, or even the very idea of advocacy, which can be negatively perceived as “activism” by society. They wonder if and how they can engage publicly without risking their reputations and the values shared by their research communities, without departing from the neutrality traditionally expected of researchers, and without compromising their impartiality or credibility.

This article summarizes an Opinion entitled “Freedom and responsibility: Academic researchers’ public advocacy” that we co-authored (COMETS 2023-44). This document resulted from a self-referral within the French *Centre National de la Recherche* (CNRS) Ethics Committee, and was written in order to provide CNRS researchers with the tools and ethical guidelines they need to

engage in public advocacy, without risking being dismissed as activists. Prior to our work, only the University of Lausanne (Fragnière et al., 2022) had written on this topic and, given the tensions and regular dismissal of scientists as activists, it appeared timely to explore the ethical dimensions of this question.

Public advocacy is defined here as ‘any public intervention by a researcher or a group of researchers, whose authority is linked to their position in the scientific field and whose content has a normative aspect, i.e. an evaluative or prescriptive stance on moral, political or social issues’ (following Fragnière et al., 2022). In accordance with this definition of advocacy, the researcher takes a position – more or less explicitly, more or less consciously and even, sometimes, unwillingly – in the field of judgment, prescription or criticism, with the aim of persuading others to act. The scope of advocacy thus delimited, the opinion encompasses multiple and varied forms of public advocacy and mobilization on political, ‘epistemic’ or other issues, and those experienced by researchers as being ‘beyond conventional academic work’. On the other hand, the definition we have chosen deliberately leaves out certain approaches which are certainly a form of engagement, but which more often than not do not constitute a normative stance and do not give rise to the questions or divided reactions that are of interest to the present study.

The publication of this Opinion was followed by a “Guide de l’expression publique des scientifiques du CNRS” [Guide on public expression for CNRS scientists] published by the CNRS in June 2025 (CNRS, 2025). For further information about the context and other existing texts on this topic please refer to COMETS Opinion 2023-44.

First, we emphasise that there is no incompatibility between a researcher’s public advocacy and the norms attributed to, or actually applied to, research. This applies in particular to the idea that science is “neutral”, which is often seen as an essential condition for the production of objective, reliable knowledge. While we agree with the need to distinguish scientific facts from opinions, it would be naive to think that a researcher could ever completely set aside his or her values: All science is a human endeavour, embedded in a social context, and as such is imbued with values (Longino, 1990; Woolgar & Latour, 1988). For example, even Charles Darwin, who came up with revolutionary ideas to explain the diversity of living beings, was influenced by the Victorian society in which he was living, in particular with respect to the role of women and more generally females in animals (Darwin, 1871). The key challenge is not to expect researchers to be free of values, but to encourage them to identify and state them explicitly, and to respect the requirements of integrity and rigour that must characterise the scientific process.

Research in the public sector requires another form of “neutrality” on the part of the researcher. This second notion of “neutrality” essentially refers to the functions that the researcher must perform as an agent: He or she must put aside any political, religious or ideological considerations when recruiting one person over another; nor must she jeopardise the operation and functioning of the institutions by exaggerated actions or statements. This obligation does not in principle stand in the way of the intellectual freedom and critical thinking that are an integral part of research work. Similarly, this second form of neutrality does not preclude their participation in societal debates in which they have a potentially valuable role to play as specialists in their field. Conversely, if researchers remain collectively silent or passive on issues of major societal importance, research institutions could lose some of their legitimacy or social standing.

Public advocacy should be understood as an individual freedom in two ways. First, each researcher

should remain free to decide whether or not to engage in public advocacy; the fact that a given researcher chooses not to take a stand in the public sphere does not constitute a breach of any professional or moral obligation. Others have argued that researchers do have a moral obligation to be advocates, e.g. in matters of climate change, where action would potentially benefit society at large. We believe that public advocacy is not part of the job description of scientists, as it is very different from usual research activities and should be left to personal choice. Indeed, some researchers may not feel comfortable expressing themselves publicly. Secondly, a researcher who engages in public advocacy does not necessarily have to seek the support of wider communities (research groups, scientific organisations, etc.), even if we consider that a collective basis for engagement has many advantages, such as shared reflection, impact of the message conveyed, and greater protection for the researcher.

While it remains a freedom, advocacy also requires academics to be aware of the need to take responsibility, not only in terms of legal liability, but also in terms of moral responsibility, because of the credibility conferred by their status and the expert knowledge that this entails. Indeed, by taking a public stance, researchers can potentially risk their academic reputation and their careers, as they are likely to express personal views not shared by their peers or being viewed as going beyond the state of the art, hence appearing as an “activist hidden behind a scientist” (what Roger Pielke (2007) calls stealth advocacy). They also risk the reputation of their institution and, to some extent, of academic research as a sector, and, more generally, the quality of the public debate to which they contribute or which they seek to provoke. Researchers enjoy a unique position that gives their words a special weight. Indeed, surveys show that scientists are among the most trusted professionals, well ahead of lawyers and politicians (Ipsos Global Trustworthiness Index, 2024). This high level of trust is related to the fact that scientists are expected to follow the scientific method and to be relatively less influenced by external considerations than other professionals. Academics must therefore ensure that this position is used in the service of the community and not to convey false or non-rigorous ideas.

In order for scientists to serve society and for the image of science to be trustworthy in the eyes of the general public, we believe that their engagement in public advocacy must include the fulfilment of certain duties. These obligations primarily concern the way in which researchers express themselves publicly. First, like any citizen, researchers must speak in accordance with the ordinary laws on freedom of expression, including those relating to defamation, libel, and slander. Secondly, they should also give their audience the opportunity to contextualise their speech, at least to avoid being misled. To this end, researchers need to “situate” their statements: Are they speaking on their own behalf, on behalf of their research community, or on behalf of the organisation to which they belong? What is their area of expertise? Are they an expert on the subject they are commenting on? What interests do they have (with a particular company, NGO, etc.)? What values underlie their statement? We think that academics can speak beyond their specific expertise, but if they do so, they should mention it and “do their homework”, i.e. identify and reflect the state of the art as best as possible (from colleagues or reviews) in advance. Furthermore, they should put their statement into perspective: What is the state of the science on which they are relying? Are there still uncertainties? Are there any controversies? They should acknowledge when there is insufficient data to reach a definitive conclusion. The current political situation in Western countries, where many people hold extremely strong views “against science”, may lead some researchers to take definite positions in some debates (COVID origin, etc.), even if their position is not fully supported by the available evidence, in order to be able to face their opponents. Such an attitude runs counter to the scientific method, which should take into account uncertainty, and may in the long term damage the

public image of science. We therefore suggest scientists should refrain from oversimplifying debates and strive to keep their opinions measured. Overall, scientists should try to give a broad perspective on the issue they are addressing and can certainly aim to persuade, provided they state their values but not bias the audience.

We are aware of the practical difficulties involved in implementing some of these standards (limited speaking time in the media, limited space in written forums, etc.). However, respecting them is a goal that researchers should systematically strive to achieve. Before expressing themselves publicly, researchers will benefit from also reflecting on their legitimacy to do so. Furthermore, the knowledge on which researchers base their engagement must be sound and based on a rigorous scientific approach. They must also reflect to ensure their messages meet the traditional requirements of integrity and rigour that apply to the production of reliable knowledge: strength of the research protocol, referencing sources, availability of primary evidence, peer review, etc. We reiterate that these requirements are the necessary corollary of the freedom of research, which is a professional freedom, and that nothing, not even the defence of a cause, however noble, justifies compromising these rules or settling for unestablished knowledge. Far from preventing researchers from vigorously defending an idea in the public arena, we believe that these requirements are, on the contrary, an essential component of public advocacy, which could otherwise easily be labelled as activism or militancy.

We further believe that, in general, academic institutions should neither encourage nor condemn researchers' engagement *a priori*, nor police such engagement in any way. In practice, researchers should not be penalised for engaging in public advocacy. The evaluation of a researcher's research activity should focus solely on his or her research work and not on any public statements that he or she has made (Fragnière et al., 2022; COMETS 2023-44). If public advocacy leads to controversy, it is not the role of the management of academic institutions to intervene in such matters, which should remain primarily a matter of scientific debate among peers. On the other hand, academic institutions must intervene when a researcher breaches integrity or deontology (where appropriate, the relevant officers should be involved), or when a researcher breaches legal limits on freedom of expression (defamation laws, etc.). Similarly, the institution should intervene to support committed researchers who are the subject of personal attacks or gagging orders. If a researcher engages in acts of civil disobedience, we believe that academic institutions should not take the place of the police or the judiciary. They should not condemn such actions *ex ante*, nor should they take on the role of the courts and punish them. *A posteriori*, in the event of a criminal conviction of a researcher, an academic institution may consider its intervention necessary and impose a sanction.

More broadly, we encourage other academic institutions to protect and promote the freedom of expression among their staff, a key element of academic freedom, alongside the freedom of research and the freedom of teaching. Indeed, academic research institutions and communities have a responsibility to support the constructive confrontation of ideas based on freedom of expression. If an academic institution decides to adopt public, normative positions on societal issues, we believe that it should respect the rules that apply to researchers, such as making its position clear and explaining the objectives and values that underpin it. The institution's position should also be open to debate within the institution itself.

In conclusion, the growing societal challenges of today have intensified discussions about the role of scientists in public debates. While each researcher should be free to decide whether or not to engage in public advocacy, those who choose to do so must weigh the risks, clarify the values that motivate

them, and adhere to certain rules and obligations in order to avoid being labelled as activists and consequently being discredited too easily. These obligations include scientific rigour, integrity, and transparency.

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Virginie Courtier-Orgogozo

Virginie Courtier-Orgogozo is a research director at the CNRS, head of a research team at the Institut Jacques Monod in Paris, lecturer at the École polytechnique and member of the CNRS Ethics Committee (COMETS). Her research focuses on genetic evolution and various biotechnologies including gene drive.

Éric Guilyardi

Éric Guilyardi is an oceanographer and climate scientist at CNRS in Paris, professor at the University of Reading, UK. He was a Lead Author for the 5th IPCC report and contributed to 6th. He is President of the Office for Climate Education, under the auspices of UNESCO, and a member of the Scientific council which advises the French Ministry of Education. He sits in the CNRS ethics committee.