



COMETS
CNRS Ethics Committee

OPINION n°2007-16

« SCIENTIFIC DELIBERATIONS ON RESEARCH FINDINGS »

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SUMMARY

One of the tasks of researchers and the institutions that fund them is to ensure the dissemination of research findings. However, the context of such dissemination is today undergoing rapid change due to the increasing importance of digital data and the Internet in the running of our societies. This Opinion, which focuses on scientific publishing, aims to highlight the ethical issues raised by this change and to make a number of recommendations concerning them.

I. Background. The rules for the organised dissemination of knowledge, established since the 17th century, have not fundamentally changed, but the professionalisation of scientific research has profoundly altered its context through the development of journals, the obligation to publish and the pressures it generates.

II. Kinds of dissemination channels. This Opinion focuses on publications, and does not address patents or databases, both of which may be discussed at a later date. In addition to the traditional channels of institutional journals and archives, there are also the rapidly expanding channels of open access journals and open archives. Each of them must ensure the excellence of the work disseminated, the speed of dissemination and its amplitude: these requirements are not always met.

III. Some thoughts on methods and procedures. Open access journals and open archives are steps towards an optimised model, still to be created, where the imperatives of free circulation, ethical concerns, quality criteria and economic equilibrium would be better combined, perhaps through self-regulation between authors and readers. The fact that the necessary scientific filters are in place does not guarantee the absence of abuses.

The procedures for signing publications (number, order) and the way they are referenced by the organisations employing the researchers are unsatisfactory.

Electronic means of wide dissemination facilitate the rapid availability of a huge pool of data from a variety of sources through search engines. This new approach, which is both attractive and effective, may be accompanied by drawbacks with regard to metadata (referencing, indexing by content). This crucial aspect implies cooperation between new generation archivists and researchers.

The construction of a European Research Area offers an opportunity for significant developments, particularly in the short term to promote accessibility to the results of research funded under the 7th Framework Programme.

IV. Ethical issues. Facilitating access by as many people as possible to knowledge acquired through public funding by considering it as a universal good, whether within the most developed countries or beyond their borders, is a major ethical choice whose consequences for humankind and societies cannot be ignored. A common policy applicable to research institutions and publishers appears indispensable. Such a policy, possibly of European inspiration, would be based on the sharing of responsibilities and the definition of institutional support.

New forms of scientific publishing are now flourishing alongside some dominant journals. The existence of a relatively small number of search engines can lead to a monopoly on the dissemination of knowledge over the Internet. The use of a single language can then lead to a limited expression of research findings.

Researchers must question the appropriateness and relevance of their decision to communicate their findings. Reviewers and review panels must be careful not to succumb to the convenience of solely exploiting parameters related to the type of journal or citation frequencies.

