

# Ethical aspects of researchers' contact with the media

LUNDS UNIVERSITY ETHICS COUNCIL | PUBLICATION NO 4 | 2020



## Ethical aspects of researchers' contact with the media

---

Pursuant to the Higher Education Act, the mandate of higher education institutions shall include third stream activities and the provision of information about their activities, as well as ensuring that benefit is derived from their research findings (HEA Chapter 1 Section 2). The importance of researchers communicating their findings is also emphasised in many other contexts. Researchers are encouraged to participate in debates and discussions to ensure that research is reported correctly. Increasingly, the public's right to be informed of research results is also invoked. Researchers' contacts with the media play an important role in living up to these demands.

This booklet discusses some of the challenges that arise in the encounter between researchers and the media and what researchers should think through before interviews, appearances, etc. A number of issues that apply to research communication in general are also highlighted here. The focus is on situations in which the researcher interacts with a journalist or an editorial committee, not on cases of researchers communicating information independently on social media for example, or taking part in a debate. Although many of the considerations addressed in the present text are also relevant to researchers' social media activities, there are significant differences. The Ethics Council is therefore planning a separate booklet dealing with the ethical aspects of research communication via social media.

Universities in Denmark have developed seven guiding principles for research communication. The Ethics Council supports these principles as benchmarks for the University's own work and as a basis for dialogue with the media, politicians and the general public. The board's intention is to contribute to increasing researchers' awareness of these principles.

## SEVEN PRINCIPLES FOR GOOD RESEARCH COMMUNICATION

### 1. Correctness.

When research is communicated, the content is to be correct and to provide recipients with a correct understanding of the factual circumstances in terms of both results and underlying research.

### 2. Relevance.

Research communication should report all circumstances which can be assumed to be relevant to the recipients' understanding of the research findings. For example, relevant information about the significance, proportions and general context of the results contributes to providing a comprehensive description of the research and its importance and should therefore be included to every possible extent. Research communication should also refer to the underlying research publications as far as possible, as well as to other research if relevant.

### 3. Uncertainty.

Research communication should clarify what methods and assumptions underpin the research findings and research evaluations, as well as the associated uncertainty aspects. Research results are always affected by varying degrees of uncertainty depending, for example, on the method, research design, data, or theoretical assumptions used. The implications of such sources of uncertainty for the research results or for other communicated content should be clarified.

### 4. Research status.

Research communication should present the ongoing research in relation to the relevant research community. Are the findings widely supported in the research community, or does this research deviate from the general understanding in the field? Are the findings preliminary or have they been published in research channels and, if so, what is the reputation of these channels?

### 5. Authorship.

Research communication should report who is the author of the knowledge communicated. Often, communication involves knowledge originating from other parts of the research community, i.e. knowledge not produced by the researcher him or herself. Reproducing knowledge for society is an important part of research communication, but the originators of knowledge should be specified in the research communication just as they are in the research itself.

**6. Perspective.**

Researchers have both the right and the duty to engage in public debate through ethical, political or scientific perspectives. It should be clear whether a perspective falls within the researcher's own area of expertise, is based on the researcher's general knowledge in a broader field, or whether it is based for example on knowledge or an approach held by the researcher but not based on the researcher's own field of enquiry.

**7. Conflict of interest.**

Research communication should describe all the circumstances that could potentially constitute conflict of interest concerning the research or the individual researcher. For example, conflict of interest may arise in relation to research funding, patent applications, remuneration, business collaborations or other forms of cooperation, personal association, etc.

**COMMUNICATING YOUR RESEARCH**

The seven principles for research communication are intended for researchers and communication staff and cover all public research communication in all channels, such as social media, opinion pieces, press releases and expert statements in the media.<sup>1</sup>

The principles are not isolated from other principles of research ethics but are rather to be understood as a complement or clarification of applicable principles in the context of contact with the media. The approaches harmonise with the basic principles in the European code of conduct for research integrity – produced by All European Academies, ALLEA.<sup>2</sup> These principles are reliability, honesty, respect and accountability.

The general public has a high level of trust in research and researchers. Great importance is attached to statements from researchers, who have often dedicated many years to a research field, and researchers should not underestimate this. Interviews, reports and articles can contribute to increased understanding, but can also confuse, concern or distract from important issues. Good research communication should therefore be preceded by a number of considerations.

---

1. <https://dkuni.dk/analyser-og-notater/danske-universitetes-principper-for-god-forskningskommunikation/> (2020-08-06).

2. <https://www.allea.org>

It is difficult to predict the impact of your own appearances or publications and there is a limit to the influence you can have over what exactly is published. However, there are some avoidable traps. Tips and advice are available via the Staff Pages.<sup>3</sup> Among the most obvious, but important, is to be well-prepared for interviews, to ask to check quotations or articles before publication, etc.

There are also more fundamental research ethics considerations to take into account. The core is to ensure that what emerges in the research provides as good a picture as possible of the investigated topic. It is also important to report any potential conflicts of interest and the origin of the research. To withhold such information may contribute to undermining trust in research, even if the research is reliable and well-executed.

Furthermore, you are to be clear about how the research was conducted and what limitations apply to the interpretation of results. Scientific proof, theory or interpretation are to be presented and reviewed in an honest and correct manner. Researchers are not to misinterpret or allow others to be misled in research issues. Since the public [and journalists] cannot be expected to have any expertise as to how new knowledge is established, the researcher, with expert knowledge and understanding of the conditions for research, has a major responsibility in preventing misunderstandings.

For a researcher to disclose information to the media about research subjects is, except in very rare cases, an unacceptable departure from the research ethics principle of respect for integrity and confidentiality requirements.

Naturally, researchers, just as all other public sector employees, have the right to express themselves freely and to share information. However, they are not permitted to speak as they please on behalf of the public authority; the public authority is entitled to determine who speaks for it and how. In order to avoid misunderstandings, you should therefore make it clear in which role you are speaking. From the perspective of the general public, it can also be a good idea to inform your audience about the extent to which you are speaking as a private individual or in your role as a researcher. A person who is the hierarchical superior of someone who has made a statement must be careful not to act in a way that could be perceived as a reprisal because of a statement. Any further discussions are to be centred on the actual topic in question. Everyone is free to criticise/debate a colleague's position on the

---

3. <https://www.medarbetarwebben.lu.se/stod-och-verktyg/kommunikation-och-grafisk-profil/press-och-nyheter/tips-vid-mediekontakter> (2020-05-09)

matter in question and this can also contribute to the general public gaining a more complete picture of the prevailing factual circumstances.

The general public's trust in research is not something to be taken for granted. On the contrary, it can be tested every time researchers make an appearance – the trust may be reinforced or weakened. At the same time as external engagement with wider society is an important part of the University's remit, each researcher should engage responsibly to preserve the public's high level of trust in research from higher education institutions. The seven principles for research communication constitute useful guidance.

## MEETING THE MEDIA

Contacts with the media can take many forms and can be affected by whether the initiative was taken by the researcher or the journalist. Researchers may want to talk about their research findings, take part in public debate in their area of expertise or contribute to knowledge dissemination.

Among other things, the media is guided by the principle that the general public is entitled to know what is happening in society. In this perspective, public interest in a particular issue can sometimes be considered as justification for publishing even very sensitive information. In addition, priorities are often unavoidable and the media may choose, for business reasons, to dedicate space to content that generates a great deal of interest [many readers, viewers, clicks, etc.] despite the topic not being of major societal impact.

The Freedom of the Press Act and the Fundamental Law on Freedom of Expression ensure strong protection for press freedom and freedom of expression in Sweden. The media generally follow self-imposed media ethics rules whose aim is to preserve public trust and protect individuals from [unnecessary] suffering in connection with publication.<sup>4</sup> This includes objectivity, the respect of privacy, being careful around the use of names and images and allowing different sides of an issue to be represented.<sup>5</sup> Great importance is also to be attributed to the accuracy of news stories.

---

4. <https://medieombudsmannen.se/publicitetsregler/> (2020-08-05)

5. Journalists, in turn, have professional ethics rules that aim to a high degree to preserve independence, respect for privacy, and reliability <https://www.sjf.se/yrkesfragor/yrkesetik/yrkesetiska-regler> (2020-08-05)

Protection of privacy and the importance of being able to trust what is reported are two principles that unite research ethics and media ethics. However, a lack of understanding for one another's differences can lead to problems. A shortage of time and space in the media may cause a journalist to want to simplify and abridge in a way that the researcher perceives as misleading. Through headline choices etc. the media may choose formulations that pique readers' interest. Correct and nuanced descriptions of the current state of knowledge are rarely sensational. The individual researcher normally determines neither the tempo nor the format. Often, short deadlines are set for reviewing the questions after the interview and the nuances that the researcher would like to communicate may have to be left out due to the format. Speed brings a risk of error and the short format risks contributing to a simplification that leaves out important nuances. In contacts with the media, different organisational logics may contribute to misunderstandings and sometimes to conflicting aims between researchers and journalists. As researchers, you should try to ensure compliance with the ethical principles above as far as possible, even when the media are responsible for the final product. In cases where there is strong evidence for a research finding, this could, according to the researcher, be obscured by the journalist's will to allow different voices to be heard. A strong will to present an interesting piece of news can lead to misleading information, from both sides, and generate concern or unrealistic expectations in the recipient. The issues are complicated by the current situation in which there are few science journalists with a good understanding of science and its conditions.

Contact with the media is facilitated by reflecting in advance on both similarities and differences in organisational logic and working methods. Requests that go against research ethics should not be granted.

## Lund University Ethics Council

The council works to increase understanding of the importance of an ethical approach to the University's activities, stimulate discussion and debate on ethical issues, as well as promote the development of knowledge in the area of ethics.

The Ethics Council acts in an advisory capacity to the Vice-Chancellor and the Vice-Chancellor's Management Council on ethical issues.

**Bo Ahrén**

pro vice-chancellor, chair

**Fredrik Andersson**

dean, School of Economics and Management

**Ann-Katrin Bäcklund**

director, Pufendorf Institute

**Stefan Eriksson**

senior advisor to the vice-chancellor, Uppsala University

**Torun Forslid**

Senior advisor to the office of the vice-chancellor, University management

**Mats Johansson**

associate professor, Department of Clinical Sciences

**Sara Kalm**

docent, Sociologiska institutionen

**Jimmie Kristensson**

vice dean, Medicinska fakulteten

**Anna Meeuwisse**

professor, School of Social Work

**Vilhelm Persson**

professor, Faculty of law

**Björn Petersson**

associate professor, Department of Philosophy

**Ingrid Svensson**

universitetslektor, Avdelningen för medicinsk teknik

**Brian Thorsbro**

Lund University students unions

Contact person:

Magnus Gudmundsson, [magnus.gudmundsson@rektor.lu.se](mailto:magnus.gudmundsson@rektor.lu.se)

