

EGU24-1344, updated on 20 May 2024

<https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-egu24-1344>

EGU General Assembly 2024

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Freedom and Responsibility: the Ethics of Academic Researchers' Public Advocacy

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Academic researchers have long been advocates of various causes in the public arena; their public advocacy to take normative positions regarding various moral, political or social issues is not new. Today, however, in the face of the many challenges facing our society, the question of researchers' public positions, particularly in relation to the environment and climate change, is being raised anew. A number of climate scientists are committed in a variety of ways, from signing op-eds to participating in the work of NGOs or think tanks, supporting legal actions or writing blog posts. In addition, the development of traditional and social media has significantly increased the public exposure of these researchers. At the same time, serious questions are being raised within the research community. Many of its members are debating the ways in which researchers can engage in such public advocacy, its advisability, and even its very principle. However, these debates are currently taking place in informal settings and, given the extensive individual experience of a number of colleagues, it is probably time to engage in this discussion in a more collective and organised way, as is done in other research communities.

Here are some examples of questions that might be discussed. How can researchers engage in public advocacy safely and responsibly? What is the role of the scientist versus the expert versus the citizen versus the activist? Can a researcher be neutral when taking a public stance? What is the risk of appearing naive, manipulated or irrelevant? How should researchers deal with vested interests and private actors? Should the climate community research geoengineering? For whom should researchers develop climate services?

Because addressing these issues involves a tension between personal values that may go beyond those shared by the scientific community, they are essentially novel ethical questions. Some may be so intimidating that many researchers choose not to engage publicly. Care must therefore be taken to organise the exchange properly, for example by creating safe internal spaces for debate or by inviting experts from other disciplines.

The French CNRS Ethics Committee has recently published on opinions on these issues[1], which I will use as a starting point for a broader discussion.

[1] <https://comite-ethique.cnrs.fr/en/comets-opinion-freedom-and-responsibility-academic-researchers-public-advocacy/>

