International Science Council
The global voice for science

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International Science Council position on research funding transparency

The scientific method depends upon the exposure, to debate and critique, of key concepts, evidence, and uncertainties and is undermined when this process is distorted or suppressed. The financial and other interests of funders and researchers can give rise to conflicts of interest and distortion or suppression of research processes and outcomes. To ensure the effectiveness of scientific debate and knowledge production, it is crucial that sources of funding for research are publicly disclosed. Funding of research by the private sector, by governments, non-governmental organizations and philanthropies may be informed by a range of interests related to economic, political or ideological purposes, which can give rise to a vested interest in a particular outcome of the research which is being funded. The existence of such interests is inevitable. The mischief which this position seeks to address is where funders and researchers seek to influence, compromise or manipulate research processes and outcomes in the service of such interests.

The modern scientific enterprise relies on diverse sources of funding spanning the public sector (e.g. government departments and multilateral organizations), the private sector (industry and other for-profit actors) and civil society (e.g. philanthropic sources and NGOs). All drive innovation and support critical advancements that improve and safeguard the wellbeing of people and the planet. However, all scientific research is vulnerable to manipulation and bias affecting funders and researchers that may negatively influence accuracy and societal outcomes. The risks of manipulation and bias are mitigated when funding sources and relationships between funders and researchers are open to scrutiny by the public and by the scientific community.

In some cases, financially powerful funders with vested economic or non-economic interests may strategically support actions that obfuscate, misrepresent, distract from or otherwise undermine well-established scientific consensus for the advancement of those interests. In this way, research funding can be used to compromise the integrity and outcomes of science and to spread misinformation and disinformation.[1]

There are misinformation and disinformation practices — sometimes called a "playbook" — which rely upon relationships between funders and researchers that are hidden from public view. They work, in part, because the public is led to believe that the research at issue is produced independently of commercial or other special interests. Anti-science campaigns waged by the tobacco, fossil fuel, and pesticide industries

[1] The ISC follows the UN's understanding of mis- and disinformation, where misinformation refers to the unintended spread of inaccurate information whereas disinformation is actively intended to deceive.

are particular cases. Their strategies and impacts are now widely known — the deliberate misleading of the public for commercial gain and the consequent, wide-ranging adverse effects on human health and the environment. As well, there are anti-science actions by governments, advancing a variety of agendas, such as those impacting health and environmental policies. These global campaigns continue, as do many smaller efforts to obscure scientific evidence across many scientific disciplines worldwide. Abuses and misuses of the science system undermine public trust in science and have the potential to cause grave public harm. The threat is large enough that the World Economic Forum's 2025 Global Risks Report lists misinformation and disinformation (broadly, and beyond the sphere of science) as the top short-term risk to human development over the next two years – ahead of extreme weather events and armed conflict — and as the only one of the top 5 risks over the next decade which is not related to the deterioration of the natural environment.

The ISC's Principles of Freedom and Responsibility in Science emphasize a shared responsibility throughout the global science system to ensure that scientific research, data, and findings are free from adverse impacts arising out of financial and other conflicts of interest leading to manipulation of scientific research. Allowing science to be used for the spread of misinformation and disinformation represents a failure of these principles, which risks false, misleading, and actively harmful results. Fundamentally, this undermines the standing and role of science as a global public good — inaccurate information cannot be a beneficial resource. As highlighted in a 2024 report to the UN Human Rights Council by the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, the manipulation of scientific evidence, data, and consensus in misinformation and disinformation campaigns also presents a serious infringement of the right to participate in and benefit from science by preventing the public from accessing accurate scientific information and from applying it in beneficial ways.

In 2022 the UN Secretary-General issued a report, Countering Disinformation, which calls for investment in the battle against disinformation. Many tools exist to help combat misinformation and disinformation, but one comparatively simple and uncontroversial method the scientific community is well-placed to adopt widely and immediately is insisting on transparency of all research funding sources, regardless of origin. Funding transparency, while not a complete solution, is a relatively easy first step of mitigation and of disarming anti-science misinformation and disinformation campaigns. Transparency does not imply any reduction in funding, and organizations already have all the required information at hand. Therefore, the costs of implementing transparency are typically low, while the rewards can be high — increased scientific efficacy and trust in science, which benefit society.

The global scientific community — at all levels, from individuals to institutions and governments — has a clear responsibility to maintain and expand transparency of all research funding sources. This responsibility has become increasingly urgent as declining government funding has pushed universities and other research institutions, for example, to adopt more entrepreneurial approaches, including securing private sector funding. This shift often occurs with little or no consideration for transparency.

The ISC holds that universal research funding transparency is a crucial part of responsible scientific practice and the first line of defense against the compromise of research integrity and the spread of misinformation and disinformation. The ISC recommends that:

1. All levels of the global science system adopt the norm, where legal, of explicitly disclosing the extent of financial and other support provided by funders to researchers and that this be noted in all public communications by the researcher such as articles, websites, presentations, conferences

and in all contexts where the researcher can reasonably be taken to be speaking as an expert.

2. All scientific journals require formal declarations of the source of funding for research which they publish.
3. The obligation to disclose research funding be recognized as shared between universities, learned societies, unions, funding bodies and other scientific organizations, and not held to be the sole responsibility of individual researchers.
4. Institutions and organizations be proactive in developing mechanisms to ensure routine and standardized research funding transparency.