

# Towards an Ethics of Expert Communication

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**As the Covid-19 pandemic spread across the globe, our daily environments were drastically altered. The dependable rhythms of work, family, and friends were shattered. In this state of uncertainty, we turned towards scientific experts as steady hands. Yet, as we did so, it became apparent how relatively minute alterations to the decisions of scientific experts could have an outsized impact on the lives of citizens.**

What guides the expert? Often the only guidance experts receive is to “speak truthfully” (O’Neill 2002). Existing codes of conduct give scientists ethical guidance on publishing, supervising, or reviewing—but none of the major codes even mention the activity of giving expert advice to the public and policy makers (Desmond 2021). Yet, it has become clear that scientists, in giving expert advice, must exercise their own individual judgment beyond merely conveying the scientific state of the art. Does one emphasize the uncertainty of scientific findings? Or should one emphasize the potential dangers of the disease? These are difficult decisions, and the Covid-19 crisis has shown that, in times

of acute crisis, the societal need for actionable advice can be so great that scientists cannot avoid making these decisions. This essay proposes these decisions need to be guided by an ethics of expert communication in the post-pandemic world.

## Expert Communication is Never Purely Scientific...

The basic premise of this proposal, namely that dispensing scientific expertise involves considerable individual discretion, is not necessarily obvious. Consider the standard unit of scientific communication, namely, the scientific paper. In this communication format, the sender (author) can assume considerable background knowledge, and can assume that the receiver (reader) will be able to interpret statements about the relative uncertainty of results. Conclusions are never certain, and are only ever with caution and caveats, whether

in terms of limiting assumptions, confidence intervals, or effect sizes. By contrast, when expert advice is given, the target audience is the public, media, or politicians. The focus is on actionability: the public and politicians want to know what needs to be *done*. They do not need or want the level of detail and caution one can find in scientific communications.

This means that the expert must not only translate the scientific state of the art into terms that non-experts can understand, but must also make decisions about which uncertain dangers and which uncertain opportunities to emphasize. Should one emphasize the potential benefits of mouth-masks, or rather the false sense of security they can bring? Should one advise that rules on the sizes of groups are very strict, or should one allow deviations as long as people follow common sense? Should one emphasize the possible dangers of the worst-case scenario—to jolt the public into action—or only of the most-likely scenario, to prevent unnecessary panic? These are not purely scientific decisions, but complex ones that involve weighing the science against multiple social factors as well as ethical values such as respect for autonomy.

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## ... and Yet It Can Be Wholly Trustworthy

There is a danger in acknowledging the ethical aspect of expert communication. We live in a society where scientists enjoy high levels of public trust—a stark contrast with the trust placed in politicians. To admit that scientific experts must employ individual discretion seems tantamount to admitting scientific experts are biased and political.

However, as a scientific community, we must confront this challenge inherent to scientific expertise head on. Currently there is arguably a greater danger in *not* acknowledging the discretionary side of expert communication. The increased role of scientific experts in political decision-making has revived concerns about democracy being undermined by paternalism and technocracy. More worryingly, a sizeable minority of citizens now has sympathy for conspiracy theory and science denial, often among those who feel alienated and left behind by society as a whole (Larson 2020). This deep distrust of science involves attributing various nefarious motives to scientific experts, such as collusion with large corporations for financial gain or population control (see Douglas et al. 2019). In this context, claims by scientists or politicians to be “merely following the science” are not only not believed, but also interpreted as a cover for immoral action.

This brief essay has the positive message that some of the dynamics of distrust could be pre-empted by shifting the focus from *demanding trust* of the public (in virtue of scientific expertise) towards *demonstrating trustworthiness*. Scientific experts should take the initiative in showing how exactly they have extracted take-home messages from the state of the art, and turning this into actionable advice. This allows non-experts to participate in their reasoning, thus both pre-empting feelings of alienation and strengthening a democratic public discourse.

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This ‘ethics of expert communication’ would be a new dimension of scientific integrity, stipulating what it means to give expert advice in a way that is as professional and integrous as possible. It is well acknowledged that research and teaching activities should conform to general principles of integrity; now the Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated how expertise activities also need guidance by norms of scientific integrity.

This would result in a short code of conduct that could be of practical use to science experts. The code would be the result of collaborative reflection. For instance, it could contain at least the following principles:

- 1 Seek to speak appropriately.** Public communication and even media appearances should be approached with the same scrupulousness as ethical deliberation. Experts’ words have significant consequences and so must be weighed carefully.
- 2 Acknowledge the balance between scientific and public service ideals.** In choosing what to communicate, the scientific expert must weigh the needs of the scientific service ideal and the public service ideal.
- 3 Be transparent in your reasoning.** In order to minimize the probability that the expert’s message or advice will be experienced as paternalistic by the public, it is important that experts communicate not just the conclusions of their deliberation, but also the most important steps in their reasoning. In this way they show how their communication is justified, even if it turns out in the future that they were wrong.

Of course, the roots of distrust undoubtedly lie at least in part in conflicting political and financial interests, and hence one should not hope that even a fully-fledged ethics of expert communication can dispel all distrust in experts. Nonetheless, we should strive to be as irreproachable as possible in expert communication, and one way would be to demonstrate trustworthiness. This seems like a small, eminently achievable step towards increasing trust in these polarized times. ●

#### REFERENCES

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