

“Authors declare no competing interests”—really?

Most of us have made the claim, “*Authors declare no competing interests*”. But how often have we substantiated it? I propose a moratorium on making this claim without evidence; more provocatively, I suggest that—even with evidence—the claim is rarely accurate.

For those of us who have affiliations in universities or government agencies, they are no longer a guarantee of our impartiality, if they ever were. Every one of us has affiliations and other commitments that could potentially influence our assumptions, methods, and interpretations and that deserve airing.

Our title page affiliations are not transparent enough because many universities have become entangled with powerful, moneyed interests, derived from industry or government. None of us should try to claim value-neutral science. Over time, universities have seen academic freedoms erode (*Annals Iowa* 2008). Likewise, federal government scientists increasingly face restrictions and interference (*Union of Concerned Scientists* 2023). Those at state agencies are similarly at risk. During a Washington State *wildlife commission meeting* in October 2023, disagreement over scientific bias was exposed when Department of Fish & Wildlife Deputy Director Windrope stated, “...striving for an unbiased nature, which makes the science that comes from a state agency or a federal agency...so important, right? It’s really different than a nonprofit or a university that doesn’t have a regulatory component...”, prompting Commissioner Smith to respond, “...we’re a state agency, and we are always subject to pressures...And so I just think that we need to be careful to try to claim that, you know, our role is more unbiased in producing science than universities”. This dialogue reveals how easily bias can be (mis)interpreted—no one can monopolize impartiality. Because US wildlife agencies benefit from fees (paid for killing huntable species) or excise taxes (on firearms), agency researchers may be subject to financial competing interests similar to those ascribed to industry. We may hope that government science is more trustworthy or has greater oversight than academic or NGO science, but that is an empirical claim. Whatever the organization’s mission, it has a competing interest, at a minimum in its own persistence. Although we—individual scientists—cannot fully escape our worldviews, we can almost always disclose them.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that every donor to an organization imposes a competing interest on that organization’s researchers. Nor am I suggesting that we cannot do impartial science because we are unable to escape our interests. Such extreme claims demand strong corroborating evidence. By the same token, however, more evidence is needed to declare no competing interests.

Many already recognize that authors’ interests are part of their methods of doing science. Peer reviewers and subject-matter editors might be fair judges of competing interests—if chosen at arm’s length from authors and chosen from a diverse field. Of course that means reviewers and editors need to disclose fully also, or else the system is vulnerable to self-dealing. Whether a journal solicits particular reviewers with expertise in assessing potentially competing interests, or asks the general reviewers to handle this aspect of peer review, remains to be studied. Stating “*Editors aided by reviewers could find no apparent competing interests*” offers third-party certification, which is generally regarded as more trustworthy than the voluntary, self-policing approach now used.

Anti-science forces will admittedly try to use greater transparency against scientists, intimidating us into silence. Yet caution should not be an excuse for avoiding disclosure. Recently, authors denounced a request for disclosures by accusing the requestor of trying to silence them. Nonsense. Disclosure is the opposite of silencing. Sunlight is the best disinfectant, to paraphrase former US Supreme Court Justice Brandeis. However, transparency must be balanced with privacy. So how do we navigate the twin perils of maintaining transparency and privacy in an ever more polarized world?

Inevitably, some will find my proposal too time-consuming. But with current tools such as ORCID and similar platforms that store profiles of scientists, it seems comparatively straightforward to provide comprehensive disclosures annually*. Regarding privacy, a firewall accessible only to the editorial staff of accredited journals might strike the right balance between transparency and privacy. For even greater transparency, editors might consider publishing a list of the potential competing interests in the back matter of articles, without identifying which party (authors, editors, or reviewers) is attached to which interest. In this way, readers remain informed about influence while individual privacy is respected.

Greater transparency in how our competing interests are evaluated will not only provide an edge in public policy debates but also increase public confidence in science—critical to so many of today’s problems.



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*As an example, please see my CV. This site also includes copies of all public comments and letters to government agencies. I invite those who share my concern about and commitment to transparency to offer suggestions to improve it.