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Comments on Resnik: Some recent challenges to openness and freedom in scientific publication

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The paper points out the dangers of industry-sponsored research, but I would also like to draw attention to the opportunities, namely involving the industry in the research in order to create an interaction between science and society. This will primarily concern pre-competitive research; at least in the Netherlands, this kind of co-operation is actually stimulated. There are possibilities to limit the dangers, e.g. by delaying (but not prohibiting) publication for a period of, say, 6 months. As for intellectual property rights, written arrangements can be made before the research starts. It is also in the interest of the industry to educate science students in such a way that they are useful to the industry once they have graduated.

It seems to me that the distinction between public laboratories searching for truth and private labs helping the company make a profit is an artificial one. First of all, the search for truth is debatable, as public labs have their priorities as well. For instance, in the field of food science and nutrition, reality is so complicated that results will never be 'true'. Moreover, there is a drive to publish, not because of wanting to reveal the truth but because of the scientist's career, and the publication may include results and data that are not complete or are based upon research that was not properly conducted. Furthermore, editors of scientific journals are not keen to accept 'negative' results, e.g., results on drugs or foods that are shown not to have the anticipated effect. So, there is a bias in what is published, also from public labs, and the idea of truth becomes blurred. Finally, there is nothing wrong in doing science to help a company make a profit, as long as the science is carried out properly and no evident harm is done to society. Some companies have the policy to publish (some of) their obtained scientific results so that they can be seen as full and competent players in the scientific arena.

I would like to make a plea for the publication of raw data (on the internet for instance), whether or not they come from public or private labs. These data should be in the public domain and they should be available free of charge. Only for processed data a certain amount of money may be asked.

As for the notion of 'dangerous' research (i.e. research that results in data that could be used for instance for military purposes or by terrorists), I would like to remark that there is no dangerous research in my opinion. Results or data only become dangerous in a certain context, and I would strongly oppose self-censorship of scientists who withhold information or authorities that control scientific information just because it might be used in a wrong way. I do not want to deny the possible threats, but the information may also be used in a very positive way. In my own area of food science, there are quite a few positive developments made possible by research that was originally intended to serve military interests.

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