



INRAE



Charter
on Public Expression





Charter on Public Expression

Producing and disseminating knowledge to respond to the challenges confronting society and putting such knowledge to work to foster innovation, provide expertise, and lend support to public policies are at the core of the mandates of the French National Research Institute for Agriculture, Food and Environment (INRAE). Fully accomplishing those mandates implies a strong commitment to interacting with society in many different ways.

One of INRAE's priorities is to share and disseminate the knowledge it produces via a wide range of information media so as to reach all possible audiences. To achieve that goal, it is important that communication efforts be done in such a way as to ensure, wherever possible, clear, honest and understandable messages that everyone can take on and analyse in conjunction with appropriate background information. However desirable and necessary such efforts may be, they are, nevertheless, quite tricky due to the unique nature of the scientific approach, the complexity of issues related to our research and the diverse range of communication formats. Through this Charter, INRAE commits to supporting and assisting its staff by providing them with guidelines designed to promote public expression commensurate with both the work they are carrying out and society's expectations, thereby helping to forge a bond of trust with the community. This objective is in keeping with the commitments contained in the French National Charter of Ethics for Research Professions and INRAE's Ethics, Scientific Integrity and Code of Conduct Charter.





1. Background analysis

INRAE is a public targeted-research organisation. Its mandates are to carry out, organise and coordinate, at its own initiative or at the request of the French Government, all types of scientific and technological research in the areas of agriculture, food, forests, the environment, water, biodiversity, the bioeconomy, the circular economy, and sustainable land and risk management. INRAE's mission is to produce knowledge, disseminate it and assist in putting it to work to foster innovation, provide expertise, and lend support to public policies by highlighting the importance of the scientific approach for understanding the major environmental, health, economic and social challenges facing humanity and for designing solutions and transition mechanisms.

For INRAE and its staff, these public service missions have brought about an increasing number of requests of various types and forms to communicate on the work done, its outcomes and their applications. While such requests are justified as is responding to them, doing so can be tricky in several different ways.

The scientific approach, i.e. building knowledge step by step, is based on testing various theories through a range of methods and then counter-analysing the results. This is a complex process that is still not very well known outside the scientific community. While the scientific approach is long-term, media requests generally have a short timescale and are governed by various specific constraints such as limited speaking time, a desire for simple answers, etc., that do not always allow the complex nature of the topics to be addressed. So close attention must be paid in situations involving public expression about research results.

The implications of the research carried out at INRAE, the scale of the social and economic changes to be made, and the complex nature of transition scenarios can be sources of tension between stakeholders and generate possible attempts to instrumentalise research results. Whether within INRAE or in the broader scientific community, different positions can also be taken on research by scientists themselves.

The unprecedented speed and scope of the development of expression on topics of all kinds via social media has considerably increased scientists' media exposure and helped blur the boundaries between various spheres of expression, notably between professional and private forms.

So, for INRAE and our staff, the issue of communicating publicly on public research carries high stakes in terms of professional conduct, ethics and scientific integrity concerning public speech in all its diverse forms, whether it takes place in response to individual or group initiatives or to outside or in-house requests.

The French National Charter of Ethics for Research Professions, which INRAE has signed, and INRAE's own Ethics, Scientific Integrity and Code of Conduct Charter provide the basic principles that must guide public expression by staff members as well as by the Institute itself. These principles require that for every situation of public expression, an analysis be made of the related issues, the most appropriate approach to be taken and, where relevant, the potential impacts on the person involved and on INRAE.

The purpose of this document is to lay out some clear guidelines we can all share in terms of the challenges of communicating publicly and the principles that must guide it.

2. Applicable framework

Enshrined in the founding documents of the French Republic¹, freedom of expression is one facet of freedom of thought, giving expression to an individual's identity and intellectual autonomy and affecting their relations with other individuals and society. As such, exercising this freedom carries with it duties and responsibilities, and may be subject to such formalities, conditions, restrictions and penalties as are prescribed by law (*art. 10 ECHR*).

Just like the principle of independence, freedom of expression has been endorsed for researchers as a right they enjoy as part of their research work.

1 - 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, art. 11: "The free communication of ideas and opinions is one of the most precious of the rights of man. Every citizen may, accordingly, speak, write, and print with freedom, but shall be responsible for such abuses of this freedom as shall be defined by law."

["Teacher-researchers, teachers, and researchers are completely independent and enjoy full freedom of speech in the course of their teaching duties and research activities, subject to the reservations imposed on them ... by the principles of tolerance and objectivity."

(art. L952-2 of the French Education Code).²

More broadly, freedom of expression is also guaranteed for the pursuit of research activities and is available to all other research staff in the accomplishment of their mission of national interest: knowledge development; transfer and application of knowledge to all fields that contribute to society's progress; dissemination of information and scientific and technical culture; participation in training; expertise to support public policy

(art. L411-1 of the French Research Code).³

So while the principle of the freedom of expression is the rule for INRAE staff on the topics they deal with as part of their research work, expression as a private person is governed by a different legal system when it is not directly related to the staff member's research activities as part of their public service.

Expression as part of research activities

As part of their research work, researchers enjoy autonomy in their scientific approach as well as freedom of expression to ensure scientific debate. Independence, integrity, impartiality and objectivity are some of the requirements of such constitu-

tionally ensured freedom of expression.

So scientific freedom of expression is guaranteed to every researcher who expresses themselves objectively on their research areas, as well as to all other INRAE staff members who may be called on to communicate about their work. The guarantees INRAE provides to ensure this freedom take all the relevant and commensurate forms that allow, where needed, to respond to, protect or defend the exercise of this right by our staff as part of their work.

For all INRAE staff, the freedom of expression framework goes hand in hand with the democratic setting and with the consideration for the general interest that INRAE is expected to serve. These give rise to the values of impartiality, integrity, probity, and neutrality contained in Law 2016-483 dated 20 April 2016 pertaining to the Code of Conduct and the rights and obligations of public service employees. This law recalls the core principles that apply to every individual employed by a public institution.

So the duty of neutrality implies, whatever the body a staff member belongs to may be, that they shall not use or claim their professional position to publicly express their personal opinions, whether philosophical, political, religious, etc. Whenever membership in this institution is mentioned, those same core principles will lead staff to refrain from any public communication that could undermine the esteem of public research services or of any public institution, thereby complying

2 - European Convention on Human Rights, art. 10: "Freedom of expression. 1. Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers. [...] 2. The exercise of these freedoms, since it carries with it duties and responsibilities, may be subject to such formalities, conditions, restrictions or penalties as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society, in the interests of national security, territorial integrity or public safety, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, for the protection of the reputation or rights of others, for preventing the disclosure of information received in confidence, or for maintaining the authority and impartiality of the judiciary."

3 - French Research Code, art. L411-1: "Research staff contribute to a mission of national interest. This mission includes:

- a) Developing knowledge development;
- b) Transferring and applying that knowledge in businesses and in all fields that contribute to society's progress;
- c) Disseminating information to fellow citizens as part of the national open science policy and sharing scientific and technical culture throughout the community, especially with young people;
- d) Participating in basic and ongoing training efforts;
- d-a) Building the European research area and participating in European and international cooperation in terms of research and innovation;
- e) Research administration;
- f) Scientific expertise."

with the obligation of discretion inherent to their duties. Finally, the limits set out by ordinary law also apply to research staff under all circumstances, with the requirement to abide by professional secrecy and banning the use of derogatory or slanderous language.

Expression outside research activities

All INRAE staff members retain the freedom to express themselves on an individual basis like any other citizen. In such cases, the individual and personal nature of such communication must be explicitly stated: no reference may be made to the staff member's relationship to INRAE, and INRAE resources must not be used for such types of expression, e.g. email address, Twitter account, etc.

When no tie to the staff member's job has been made, the limits on such communication are the same as for any other citizen of a democratic society. All insults, contempt, slander, false allegations, incitement to commit crimes and offenses and other breaches covered under the law may be subject to prosecution.

3. Issues and guidelines

Any situation of public expression, whether arising from a personal initiative or at the request of the Institute or at the invitation of an outside organisation, will, therefore, take place within this framework and deserves to be approached with the utmost attention, with particular vigilance in regards to the following points.

To begin with, under any and all circumstances, staff members need to clarify whether they are speaking as part of the duties assigned to them by INRAE or on a personal basis.

Expressing oneself by asserting one's status as an INRAE staff member implies being able to demonstrate a direct link between the topic of that communication, on the one hand, and the activities carried out and the skills and knowledge used for the duties assigned to the staff member involved by the Institute, on the other.

For that reason, it is important, in such situations, for the staff member to specify the position of their research with regards to the topic in question so that the recipients of the message have information that will allow them to evaluate its legitimacy and scope.

When a staff member is communicating as part of the duties they have been assigned by INRAE and as member of that institution, it is important to clearly explain that what they say does not constitute "INRAE's position" on the topic involved. In fact, on the one hand, such communications do not make any sense concerning knowledge-creation-related issues and, on the other hand, only INRAE Management is qualified to claim to speak on the Institute's behalf.

In contrast, when a staff member is speaking about a topic that is not directly related to the work they do as part of their duties within INRAE, no mention of the Institute should be made. These recommendations apply equally whether the situation involves communicating as an individual or participating in group communication.

Secondly, in order to protect the integrity of the message given, it is recommended that the staff member be transparent with regards to their personal or professional ties of interest and opinion concerning the topic in question, e.g. activism, business involvement, research results funded in partnership with others, etc.

It is also wise to analyse the type of communication involved and clearly describe it, i.e. whether or not it involves sharing factual information or contributing to the scientific debate about a specific topic, summarising expertise based on the state of the art, providing a recommendation about a subject concerning society based on a set of scientific results, expressing a point of view, defending a cause, giving an opinion on the consequences or application of scientific results, etc. Special attention should be paid to this point as staff of a targeted-research institute that carries out mandates ranging from knowledge production to informing public decision-making on major challenges confronting society.

Finally, abiding by the principles of scientific integrity involves clarifying the status of the scientific context of such communications. So staff should clearly indicate whether, for example, a communication involves formulating theories that a research project will need to prove or disprove, or if it is about expected results or on advances in knowledge. Public expression concerning results must include an explanation as to whether or not there is consensus within the scientific community about those results or if there are other conflicting results and/or divergent interpretations. Such an approach helps provide a view, on both the internal and external levels, into the knowledge building process, which rarely proceeds via unanimity. The

framework provided by this document makes it possible to take on, in a transparent manner, the wide range of positions and visions that may exist on a given topic in compliance with ethical guidelines, and to apply the rules of the scientific approach to public expression on issues related to knowledge production.

More broadly, care must be taken to provide all the background information needed to clarify what is being conveyed.

As an institution, INRAE also commits to applying all these principles as part of our institutional communication efforts.

4. Implementation and support

The expectations expressed in regards to the scientific community, as legitimate as they may be, sometimes take forms that make it difficult to put into practice the above-mentioned principles.

There exists a diverse range of both communication media and approaches and circumstances that call for public expression by INRAE staff, each of which presents different levels of legitimacy and risk. Giving appropriate consideration to communication scenarios does, then, require the development of individual and group skills to allow an upstream analysis and treatment in accordance with the principles laid out in this document.

Ensuring that each and every staff member acquires those skills and develops a capacity for critical analysis is a prerequisite to the success of our approach.

INRAE pledges to mobilise the resources and skills at its disposal to (i) produce tangible guidelines that address the most frequent types of situations involving public expression and make them available to all staff, (ii) continue our targeted training initiatives with staff, (iii) share with our partners in the various communication media the framework that we have set out for the public expression efforts of our staff, as explained in this document, and (iv) provide individual support to situations that require it. All those formats will be designed to provide the best possible support to all our staff in accordance with our principles.

Finally, as a corollary to the freedom of expression of researchers and research staff when exercised on a professional level, INRAE shall afford functional protection to any staff member who may be harmed, threatened or insulted as result of what they have said within the framework of their research duties.



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**National Research Institute for
agriculture, food and the environment**



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