



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Research Ethics and the Norwegian Oil Industry

Author(s)

Rachelle Hollander

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Description

In 2014, researchers and students at University of Bergen questioned the university's research cooperation with the nation's oil industry, Statoil. The rector asked the [Norwegian National Committee for Research Ethics in Science and Technology \(NENT\)](#) for advice, which it provided in a public report.

Body

NENT provides a variety of resources for Norwegian scientists and engineers and other researchers to address issues of integrity, protection of research participants, and social responsibility. Among them are ethics guidelines, adopted in 2008 and revised in 2016. This guidance identifies obligations of research to society that include:

- Research has an independent responsibility for the role it plays in social developments.
- Research should be compatible with sustainable development.
- Research has a responsibility to contribute to greater global justice.

The questions the rector posed to NENT were as follows: Is our cooperation with the oil industry ethically questionable? Is petroleum research questionable in light of global warming?

A press release summarizing results of the inquiry reported the NENT conclusion from the Chair as follows: “It is indefensible from a research ethics perspective if petroleum research hinders processes of transition to sustainable energy and thus prevents achievement of UN climate goals which Norway has pledged to uphold.”

Answering these questions adequately requires the collection of factual information and the interpretation of those facts, and recognition that some factual evidence may be lacking while the decision needs to be made. It also requires recognition of the relevant ethics guidelines that can and should be applied to developing these answers. The boundaries of factual information to be collected are affected by the identity of the ethical guidelines.

1. What factual information needs to be collected to answer the questions?
2. Are the ethical guidelines above the right ones to use in this inquiry? Should others be applied?
3. Does this conclusion satisfy the ethical guidance in the three principles above? Is it feasible for researchers to apply these principles to their activities? Is it likely?

The entire NENT statement can be found at: etikkom.no/en/news/news-archive/2015/nents-assessment-of-research-ethics-in-petroleum-research/regarding-the-assessment-of-research-ethics-in-petroleum-research/. Last updated: Sunday, October 19, 2014; accessed on July 18, 2017.

Considering the full NENT statement, can you identify one or two positions in it that rely on one or another of the three principles above for their justification? Can you identify what principles were affecting what information the committee collected? Did the committee collect the information it needed to answer the questions?

Notes

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