

Rune Nydal's Commentary on "Research Ethics and the Norwegian Oil Industry"

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This case illustrates a role ethical committees may play as a catalyst for public debates. NENT was established in 1990 as one of three independent committees by the Norwegian government, and the Ministry of Education appoints the members (etikkom.no/en/). One objective is to stimulate better, more informed, public debate on research ethical issues. How can a committee make this happen? Traditional ways to do this are to arrange public meetings, write reports, edit academic papers and formulate research ethical codes. Such initiatives may or may not make a difference, depending on the uptake of the committee's work, their relevance and legitimacy.

In this case, the committee made a difference simply by being an established institution one could turn to, with capacities to open and extend a debate further. The critics of petroleum research could refer to NENT's research ethical codes that included issues of social responsibility and sustainability. And the rector could turn to NENT for advice on how to interpret these. NENT in turn, were able to engage relevant stakeholders at the national level. Given the formal role of NENT, the committee could send questions to rectors at the main universities, The Research Council of Norway, relevant ministries and Statoil — and expect an answer. All correspondences are publicly available. NENT assessed the answers given and offered the public statement also informed by ongoing public discussions during the period NENT worked on the case. The fact that NENT considered the ethics of petroleum research was news in Norway, being an oil producing country. The stakeholders were waiting for the statement, and asked for comments in national media and locally arranged debates at the universities. It is hard to think that the debate would have become so vivid nationally if the committee had not been there as a catalyzer for concerns found in many different sectors of the Norwegian research system.