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LETTERS

Symmetrical Transparency in Science

In recent months, there has been considerable discussion in the scientific community of the need for increased transparency, openness, and data access [Dealing with Data special section, 11 February, "Making data maximally available," B. Hanson *et al.*, Editorial, p. 649, and "Climate data challenges in the 21st century," J. T. Overpeck *et al.*, Perspective, p. 700, as well as (1-4)]. Missing from the discussion, however, is recognition that a good deal of science relevant to public and environmental health and welfare is done in the private sector and, largely because of the 1999 U.S. Data Access Act and the 2001 U.S. Data Quality Act, this private science is not subject to the same scrutiny as public science. Much or even most private science may well be of high quality, but it is difficult to judge because private science does not face the same transparency requirements as public science, even when it assesses public health, safety, or environmental threats; supports product licenses or pollution permits; or is supposed to support industry's regulatory compliance. This constitutes a seriously tilted playing field.

Ideally, both the Data Access and Data Quality Acts would be amended to apply equitably to public and private science. Because this is unlikely in the near term, we suggest that the scientific community, perhaps through the National Research Council, provide guidance for best practices regarding data access and transparency for private science affecting public health and the environment. For example, privately funded science used for public or regulatory purposes should be subject to the same transparency requirements as publicly funded science, and industry requests to protect data, under claims of confidential business interests, should be granted only when public health and safety are demonstrably not at stake (5, 6).

Of course, some data requests may well be harassing or malicious, designed to block sound public policy rather than promote it. The scientific community should therefore also suggest criteria to evaluate when data requests, under the Freedom of Information Act or other federal statutes, constitute an unreasonable burden on researchers.

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Responses to this article

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Jim J. Tozzi

Science published online 26 May 2011

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