
Backtracking and the Ethics of Framing: Lessons from Voles and Vasopressin

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Abstract

When communicating scientific information, experts often face difficult choices about how to promote public understanding while also maintaining an appropriate level of objectivity. Research ethicists have argued that scientists have at least two different kinds of obligations in communicating scientific work, which often stand in tension. On one hand, experts are expected to "stick to the facts" so that they can preserve the self-determination of those who receive information from them. On the other hand, scientists are sometimes said to have a competing responsibility to interpret or frame their work in ways that serve the public good. Using recent research on vasopressin and oxytocin in voles and humans as a case study, we argue that one way for scientists and others involved in communicating scientific information to alleviate these tensions is to pay closer attention to the major frames employed in the contexts in which they work. By doing so, they can ideally employ useful frames while also enabling the recipients of information to "backtrack" to relatively uncontroversial facts and recognize how these frames relate to their own values and perspectives. Important strategies for promoting this sort of backtracking include identifying the weaknesses of particular frames, preventing misunderstanding of them, differentiating well-supported findings from more speculative claims, and acknowledging major alternative frames.

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