

# COMITÉ NATIONAL PILOTE D'ÉTHIQUE DU NUMÉRIQUE

*sous l'égide du*  
COMITÉ CONSULTATIF NATIONAL D'ÉTHIQUE  
POUR LES SCIENCES DE LA VIE ET DE LA SANTÉ

Paris, 28 July 2023,

## **PRESS RELEASE**

### **Opinion nr. 6**

## **Ethical issues of retroactive name change in digital scientific documents**

There are many reasons why a person may one day wish to change their name or surname. In France, legal procedures allow people to request changes in their identity documents, and may use their new name, but only for the future. The temporal precision is crucial, since it means that requests to modify personal data appearing on documents prior to the name change are not accepted, whatever the reason given by the applicant. While the absence of retroactive effect is currently a legal limitation that applies to everyone, some ethical questions are raised with an acuity that societal evolution tends to reinforce. Far from being abstract, this reflection is stimulated by the growing number of requests that organisations, both public and private, are facing, in particular within the scientific community.

A referral from Inria on the issue of retroactive name changes in digital scientific documents led CNPEN to consider a subject that is all the more sensitive as it arouses strong and contrasting reactions. It was not for the committee to give an opinion on the reasons behind a name change (change of gender, religion, socio-cultural identification, etc.), but on the tension between values such as autonomy in controlling one's identification and the authenticity of the documents on which scientific practice is based. The latter value means that the integrity of digital scientific documents must not be compromised by transforming their content after they have been published, integrity being understood from the point of view of both the knowledge graph and research integrity.

Although digital technology makes it possible to retroactively change scientific documents, CNPEN points out the technical and practical limits of this possibility. Indeed it is impossible to guarantee the completeness or invisibility of such changes, which is a significant issue as highlighting retroactive name changes can affect people's privacy and even their security. CNPEN's opinion focuses on these tensions and on the way in which various digital solutions can help to overcome certain opposing values. After reviewing the state of the art of the practices of operators responding to requests for retroactive name changes, whether scientific publishers or open archives, and analysing the main digital solutions in the light of their impact on the values previously identified, CNPEN formulated seven recommendations brought together in two sets.

Firstly, the use of neutral digital identifiers "dynamically instantiated" with the desired names when the document is accessed, should be generalized for scientists. The technical implications of this method need to be studied, in particular with regard to the consistency of the instantiation of bibliographic references, citations and grammatical agreements. In this scenario, particular attention needs to be paid to the ethical issues of the governance model associated with the widespread use of these neutral digital identifiers.

The second set of recommendations is immediately applicable and focuses in particular on raising awareness among scientists at the start of their careers about the issues at stake when choosing the identifier adopted to sign their work. It is also important to inform the scientific community of the technical limitations of retroactive name change solutions for digital scientific documents and to study the technical and ethical issues involved in limiting access to the original version of a document when a new version is specifically published to take account of a name change. Finally, it is crucial to always keep the original version of a digital scientific document in the archives.

This opinion responds to Inria's referral, which is devoted specifically to the retroactive nature of name changes and to a field limited to elements of scientific production. However, CNPEN's reflection deserves to be extended later to the more general question of identity and its evolution in the digital age.