

OPEN**SEN-09-061**

Protocol Sigma: Disclosure Under Uncertainty

DATED	October 2, 2009	TYPE	Technical memorandum
ORIGIN	Office of the Director	SITE	--
PAGES	5	CUSTODY	MERIDIAN

The decision procedure the Disclosure Board applies when it does not know whether publishing will help. Includes the three questions, the tie-break, and the requirement to record the decision against the person who made it.

SCOPE

Protocol Sigma governs publication decisions where the outcome is genuinely uncertain -- where reasonable people at this institution disagree about whether release does more good than harm.

It does not apply to routine publication, which is the default, nor to material withheld for third-party consent reasons, which is not a judgement call.

THE THREE QUESTIONS

The Board asks these in order. Any single "no" is not decisive; the pattern is.

1. Does withholding protect anyone other than us?

If the honest answer is that withholding protects the institution's reputation, funding or convenience, that is recorded as such and given no weight. Embarrassment is not a classification criterion.

2. Is the harm from release concrete, or is it a category?

"This could be misused" is a category. It is true of everything and therefore decides nothing. The Board requires a specific mechanism, a specific party and a plausible path. Where one cannot be articulated, the objection does not survive.

3. What does the reader do with a gap?

Withholding is not neutral. A reader who encounters a hole in the record fills it, usually with something worse than the truth. This is the question most

often underweighted, and it is the reason SEALED entries are listed at all rather than simply omitted: an acknowledged gap is more honest, and less generative of invention, than a silent one.

THE TIE-BREAK

Where the three questions do not resolve, the Board publishes.

This is deliberately asymmetric. An institution with a private archive and a patient disposition will, without a thumb on the scale, drift toward withholding -- every individual decision to wait is defensible, and the accumulation is a body of knowledge nobody outside can see. The tie-break exists to counteract a bias we know we have.

RECORDING

Every Sigma decision is recorded with:

- the date, the question, and the outcome;
- the names of the members who decided it;
- the reasoning, in the deciding members' own words, not a summary; and
- a review date, because circumstances change and a decision made once should not become permanent by inattention.

Review dates are honoured. SEN-14-052 has been reviewed twice under this protocol and its classification re-affirmed both times, with reasoning published each time.

ON BEING WRONG

The protocol assumes the Board will make mistakes, and is designed so that mistakes are visible and correctable rather than invisible and permanent.

Since 2009 the Board has reversed itself seven times: five toward release, two toward restriction. Each reversal is itself recorded, including the original reasoning that turned out to be wrong.

The institution regards this as the protocol working. A disclosure process that has never reversed a decision is not careful. It is unexamined.

End of record SEN-09-061. Reproduced from the Archive of record at MERIDIAN. Handling markings are internal publication conventions of Sentinel Research Group and correspond to no external scheme.