

IACR Policy on Conflicts of Interest

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1 Purpose

A *conflict of interest (COI)* is a situation in which a person is involved in multiple interests, one of which could affect the judgment of that individual. In the context of scientific reviewing on behalf of the IACR, a COI exists when particular relationships between reviewers and authors, or their respective institutions, may taint a reviewer's decision making, or are likely to be perceived by others as doing so. COIs can induce undesirable biases, distorting program-committee decisions and damaging community perception of the fairness of the review process.

The purpose of having an IACR Policy on COIs is to specify clear guidelines for dealing with the COIs that routinely arise in the peer-review process for IACR publications. The policy aims to reduce the likelihood of inappropriately biased judgments while simultaneously minimizing the loss of well-qualified reviewers. Authors, reviewers, editors, and program chairs in the context of IACR's operations should adhere to the highest of ethical standards when dealing with COIs. The IACR requires all involved parties to pay attention to COIs, to be transparent about potential COIs, and to be open about how they deal with them.

Bias, including unconscious and unintentional bias, is an age-old problem in scientific research. There is no simple or universal solution. COIs are routine, complex, and edge cases certainly occur. The integrity of reviewing is maximized when all parties take COIs seriously, disclose them, discuss them, and recognize their complexity.

2 Policy

In this document *reviewer* refers to any person who evaluates a submission with respect to its suitability for publication in an IACR venue. Reviewers include program committee members for conference publications, editorial board members for journal publications (*Journal of Cryptology*) and journal-conference hybrid publications (*ToSC* and *TCHES*), sub-reviewers, referees for journal publications, and individuals doing ad hoc reviews for a program chair or editor.

We say that a reviewer has an *automatic COI* with an author

1. if one is or was the thesis advisor to the other, no matter how long ago;
2. if they shared an institutional affiliation within the prior two years;
3. if they published two or more jointly authored works in the last three years; or

*The most recent version of this document can be obtained from <https://www.iacr.org/docs/>.
Editors of this document: C. Cachin and P. Rogaway (2017).

4. if they are immediate family members.

A reviewer has an automatic COI with a submission if he or she has an automatic COI with any of its authors. Additionally, a reviewer has an automatic COI with a submission if the reviewer is authoring a paper (in submission or in preparation) whose content substantially overlaps that of the submission.

Clarifying some of the language used above, *thesis advisor* (also sometimes called *supervisor*) refers to a (primary or secondary) thesis advisor (the reviewer was advisor or advisee of an author). It does not include members of a dissertation committee that were not a student's advisor. *Sharing an institutional affiliation* means working at the same location/campus of the same company/university. It does not include separate universities of the same system nor distant locations of the same company. The *date* relevant for a paper in submission is the date when it was submitted. *Jointly authored work* refers to jointly authored papers and books, whether formally published or just posted online, resulting from collaboration on a scientific problem. It usually does not include joint editorial functions, like a jointly edited proceedings volume. For online publication, the first posting (not revisions) is the relevant date. Multiple versions of a paper (conference, ePrint, journal) count as a single paper. *Immediate family members* include at least parents, children, siblings, spouse or significant other.

COIs are not restricted to automatic ones, others being possible. COIs beyond automatic COIs could involve financial, intellectual, or personal interests. Examples include closely related technical work, cooperation in the form of joint projects or grant applications, business relationships, close personal friendships, instances of personal enmity. Full transparency is of utmost importance, authors and reviewers must disclose to the chairs or editor any circumstances that they think may create bias, even if it does not raise to the level of a COI. The editor or program chair will decide if such circumstances should be treated as a COI. PC chairs are encouraged to ask for a *conflict statement* in the PC-only part of paper reviews, where reviewers can disclose such circumstances to the entire committee. For venues with anonymous submissions, the decision to request or add a conflict statement should be balanced against the loss of anonymity.

3 Implementation

During the submission process, authors mark all members of the program committee with whom they have an automatic COI. They should separately communicate to the program chair or editor any further COIs of importance. It is the responsibility of all authors of a paper to ensure the accuracy of all provided COI information. The definition of COIs should be summarized on the submission form and possibly in the Call for Papers. Sample language for this is provided in Section 5.

During the review process, program committee members mark all those submissions as conflicted with which they know themselves to have an automatic COI. They should separately communicate to the program chair or editor any further COIs of importance.

When a program committee member has an automatic COI with a paper, he or she may not see the paper or its reviews, comment on it, or vote to select it for any awards. In case of a physical program committee meeting, the individual must leave the room when the paper is discussed.

For COIs of importance, the program chair or editor decides whether to treat it in the same way as an automatic COI or whether to relax some of the restrictions. In such cases it is

particularly important to be transparent about the potential COI to the involved parties.

While sub-reviews should not be requested from a party with a known COI, because all IACR general conferences and most IACR area conferences use anonymous submissions, a sub-reviewer may end up reviewing a paper with which he or she has a COI. If the reviewer does not know of the COI at the time of the review, this is not a problem. Posting papers online can have the unintended consequence of causing potential sub-reviewers to acquire a known COI. A prospective reviewer must never be pressed to provide an opinion or review once he or she expresses concern over a COI.

4 Scope

All IACR General Conferences must follow this policy. The *Journal of Cryptology* will likewise do so. Other IACR-sponsored venues are encouraged to do so. If any IACR venue (e.g., an IACR Area Conference) chooses to follow an alternative COI policy, that policy must be documented publicly and approved by the relevant steering committee.

5 Sample language

The following is an example of language that might be used in a call for paper or an online submission form:

Conflicts of Interest: Authors, program committee members, and reviewers must follow the *IACR Policy on Conflicts of Interest*, available from <https://www.iacr.org/docs/>.

In particular, the authors of each submission are asked during the submission process to identify all members of the Program Committee who have an automatic conflict of interest (COI) with the submission. A reviewer and an author have an automatic COI if one was the thesis advisor/supervisor to the other, or if they've shared an institutional affiliation within the last two years, or if they've published two or more joint authored works within the last three years, or if they are in the same family. Any further COIs of importance should be separately disclosed. It is the responsibility of all authors to ensure correct reporting of COI information. Submissions with incorrect or incomplete COI information may be rejected without consideration of their merits.