

A conversation with Professor Simon Nicholson, March 10, 2017

Participants

- Professor Simon Nicholson – Co-Executive Director, Forum for Climate Engineering Assessment (FCEA)
- Claire Zabel – Research Analyst, Open Philanthropy Project

Note: These notes were compiled by the Open Philanthropy Project and give an overview of the major points made by Professor Nicholson.

Summary

The Open Philanthropy Project spoke with Professor Nicholson to get a final update on our grant to the Forum for Climate Engineering Assessment (FCEA). The conversation focused on how the FCEA working group's third convening (which Claire attended) went, outcomes from the meeting, and the working group's potential next steps.

Third meeting of the working group

FCEA's academic working group examining climate engineering governance pathways recently held its third convening to gather a group that included global governance experts who had not previously looked into the climate engineering space (most previous climate engineering governance discussions have been among scientists or small groups of field experts). The basics of the issue were covered during FCEA's first two convenings; the most recent meeting focused on looking for lessons from the governance of other emerging technologies and climate response measures that could potentially be applied to climate engineering.

The meeting had two main goals:

1. To provide input to the process of FCEA's working group going forward. The conference proved very useful in this respect and has shaped the working group's subsequent conversations.
2. To learn about and compare governance ideas and outcomes across different technological domains.

The meeting included experts from many domains (e.g. artificial intelligence, nanotech, nuclear fusion), and the working group learned about governance regimes and mechanisms that have been implemented in these other domains that might be helpful in geoengineering. Many domains appear to have had similar issues around accountability and transparency. The meeting also explored broad questions about public engagement and participation; there does not seem to be consensus on what is effective for getting the public to engage with an issue.

Outcomes of the workshop

The most important outcome of the workshop was the contribution of important new components to the FCEA working group's future deliberations. It facilitated a

shift in focus from high-level conceptual questions to the specifics of regulatory design.

Workshop participants got to know each other better, and the FCEA working group formed new connections with people from other fields. It was especially beneficial to connect the working group with the younger workshop participants (e.g. postdocs) who are doing interesting work.

There seemed to be interest and engagement, both from the working group and the other participants, in learning from the different perspectives represented, and FCEA hopes to find ways to continue this type of conversation. For instance, David Rejeski and Eleonore Pauwels of the Wilson Center were interested in the topics explored at the workshop, and FCEA may try to identify opportunities to collaborate with them in the future.

Even talks at the workshop that seemed to have less direct relevance to the working group's work ended up contributing meaningfully to subsequent conversations (e.g. Leon Gurevitch's presentation about the movement of people within the visual tech industry and the effect of products like Google Earth on how people think about global issues). Steve Rayner's presentation on his work outside of climate engineering was also helpful.

World Wide Views

World Wide Views is a program run by the Danish Board of Technology Foundation that has sponsored several events over the last few years in which thousands of people around the world meet on a single day and are given information about a topic (e.g., biodiversity, climate change, etc.); the organizers then attempt to get an overall sense of how the public is engaging with the issue. Wil Burns, co-executive director of FCEA (along with Professor Nicholson), is working with some working group members from Arizona State University to put together a proposal to hold one of these on climate engineering. He has spoken to the Danish Board of Technology and there seems to be interest. Professor Nicholson estimates this would cost around \$1 million.

Potential improvements

- It may have been better if the meeting were more diverse in terms of participants' backgrounds and geographic origins.
- Holding the meeting over two or three days may have been better than fitting everything into one day (though it is more difficult for people to fit a multi-day event into their schedules).
- It might have been beneficial to state some specific desired outcomes (beyond providing inputs to the working group's process) at the start. This might have helped people generate more ideas and caused comments to be more focused.

Potential harms

Professor Nicholson doesn't see any potential negative impacts from the conference, beyond standard "slippery slope" concerns around climate engineering. His view is that climate engineering research seems to be moving forward, so thinking about governance is necessary. However, some people are opposed to climate engineering research being done at all and are concerned that conferences like this could lend legitimacy to the space.

Plans for the future

The working group plans to release a draft report describing the workshop's goals and results in October and a full report in mid-February, 2018. There will be at least one meeting of the full group prior to the full report's release. FCEA hopes that this report can serve as a point of engagement for future activities, and is looking for additional funding to support its engagement with other constituencies around the world.

The Carnegie Climate Engineering Governance Initiative has launched and is in a good position to get a sense of opportunities for discussion of climate engineering governance within the UN System, whereas FCEA is more engaged with academia. Professor Nicholson thinks that, together, these two components could have a significant impact on the governance conversation.

*All Open Philanthropy Project conversations are available at
<http://www.openphilanthropy.org/research/conversations>*