

Event

Science policy and regulatory assessment are being challenged to engage the public in more reflexive, open deliberation about the choices we are making related to technologies including bioproducts and crops.

Significance

Concerns about governance in the knowledge economy – especially about who is responsible for assessing and managing the impacts of transformative technologies – are reflected in public mistrust and allegations that innovation in applied genomics has escaped conventional mechanisms of democratic accountability. For all their advantages in terms of improving efficiency, expert-based networks raise serious problems of legitimacy when they exclude participation by non-scientific actors, especially members of the public.

Analysis

More openness and transparency about research on applied genomics is being encouraged, yet the public is often treated as the passive recipient of messages designed to fix “misunderstandings” about genomics research. The traditional methods of survey research and intensive small group studies are well-developed and used to understand the characteristics of audiences in order to craft messages for those processes.

How can information sources become known and trusted, and how can audiences be transformed from passive recipients to active seekers and users of the information? Two seriously under-theorized elements currently constrain efforts to achieve an open, transparent and engaged debate.

First, “the public” is often presented as undifferentiated and passive, eager to “re-engage” with scientists and public institutions. Experience shows that the public consists of a variety of publics, each with their own motivations for engagement, often with very little to do with the project of restoring public confidence in applied genomics.

Second, while misunderstandings about applied genomics could be resolved by better communication, dismissal of public concerns by scientific and policy institutions – the so-called “deficit model” – perpetuate mistrust and underlying resentments.

In response to these constraints, it is increasingly necessary to investigate the social construction of target populations, focusing on the central or prominent positions in social networks. Who, for example, is the first resource to which active seekers of information will turn? Equally, new approaches to engagement are sought to open network governance to democratic decision-making. These include deliberative democracy, e-democracy, public conversations, participatory budgeting, citizen juries, study circles, collaborative policy making, and other forms of deliberation and dialogue among groups of stakeholders or citizens.

Conclusion

Much empirical research exists on the advantages and disadvantages of particular methods of engagement. There remains a need to compare the specific vehicles for engagement that deliver improved legitimacy for network governance with a better understanding of the resonance that engagement vehicles have with particular issue areas, regulatory styles, institutional structures and cultural contexts. The kinds of engagement that work in a context of adversarial legalism – participatory rule-making, for example – are unlikely to be the same as those that have proved effective in more collaborative environments, such as consensus conferences.¹

¹ Einsiedel, E., Jelsøe, E. and T. Breck. 2001. Publics at the technology table: the Australian, Canadian and Danish Consensus Conferences. *Public Understanding of Science*. 10:83-98.