Communicating Climate Engineering

Asher Minns

COMMUNICATING CLIMATE ENGINEERING

Asher Minns

I don't like climate engineering. I don't like climate engineering because I don't know how to communicate climate engineering. How do I, as a science communicator, communicate ideas for technologies that are untested, untried and don't yet exist? And what would be the implications of these imaginary ideas for society and economy? Talking concepts, ideas and evidence-base is what science communication is all about; communicating the unknown unknowns of climate engineering presents us with certain problems.

When I started out in my profession, communicating the evidence-base for climate change was a difficult story, but people were receptive to the science and the evidence. The phrases global warming and climate change have entered common usage in households and policy parlance. From a marketing perspective, 'climate change' and 'global warming' are global brand names familiar in Europe, India, and even Idaho. Communicating climate change is a job well done. Having raised awareness, the climate conversation has rightly developed to what we can do about climate change now.

The general public have not yet heard of geoengineering or climate engineering. If any of the proposed ideas look to becoming a reality, then a sensible and measured conversation needs to take place between pro and anti over what choices exist and what consequences they will bring. The same might be said of Genetically Modified Crops in the EU. Because of the hysteria portrayed by the media responding to pro and anti, a decade of research knowledge and a sensible measured conversation within society has been lost.

The simplest way to communicate climate engineering promotes big engineering techno-fix ideas for reducing the heat of the sun hitting earth, or scouring the excess carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere. Back in 2004, I press-released a workshop where big thinkers deliberated on the best ideas for geoengineering; my science fiction-like news made front-page headlines in the UK and led to a feature article in the magazine New Scientist. Yes, this gave the workshop and my organisation good publicity. No, it was not good science communication for public understanding, just a sensational headline presenting geoengineering as a technical solution with neither risk nor societal hazard.

There is an additional hazard. Promoting techno-fixes that exist independently of society can result in no one taking responsibility for making them happen. The past decade has been lost to another techno-fix idea, Carbon Capture and Storage. It could have been pioneered and tested, but instead we had policy people, engineers and scientists talking about it a lot, but not doing it.

In the UK there has been a great deal of very early upstream public engagement around geoengineering, with researchers asking focus groups to deliberatively think about and give their opinion. Work recently published in Nature Climate Change (April, 2013) describes the public opinion of research intended to test the idea of a high altitude-pipe, in case anyone ever wants to spray aerosols as a cooling-aid for the atmosphere. The researchers found that people were reluctantly supportive of testing climate-engineering ideas as long as all other ideas for mitigation were pursued wholeheartedly as well. One of the researchers told me that a common public comment was 'is climate change really going to be so bad that you are seriously thinking about geoengineering?' Climate change is a successful brand-name, but people don't know very much about the product. In this way, climate change communication still has a way to go beyond awareness-raising.

Our existing model of climate change communication only takes us so far when applied to climate engineering. Even though the European public overwhelmingly agree that the planet is warming and that humans are mainly or partly responsible, climate change has become a politically contested space, particularly in the US, UK and Australia. The media in these countries often presents two contrasting types of climate change expert – denialist skeptic or scientific conspirator. Instead of following this same contested route where the elites lobby the politicians and the public asks astute questions to pick through the misinformation and confusion, climate engineering requires a grown-up adult conversation across society. Only yesterday I was asked by a non-specialist, an artist, 'Is there anywhere I can go to get quality and unbiased information about climate change?' My answer, so sadly, was no.

In contrast to my 2004 press release, climate engineering should not be presented as the Plan B societally independent techno-fix solution to global warming. All pro and anti-parties should today agree to agree that climate engineering will not become the latest battlefield of climate-change communication. Instead, for the benefit of society, we all agree to have a grown-up adult conversation in which answers are sought to questions regarding the viability, reliability, safety and acceptability of climate engineering.

Asher Minns is a science communicator specialising in knowledge transfer of climate change research to audiences outside of academia. As Manager of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, a partnership of eight UK Universities and Fudan University in Shanghai, he engages target audiences in climate change research, disseminates research results through the media and other channels, and compiles evidence for UK, EU and international bodies. He lectures internationally on climate change communication. www.tyndall.ac.uk

Imprint: EUTRACE secretariat

Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies e.V. | Berliner Strasse 130 | D-14467 Potsdam
Mail: wanda.born@iass-potsdam.de