

World Governance of Emerging Technologies?

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Even holistic thinkers need to broaden their scope sometimes. This is my impression from the First Annual Conference on Governance of Emerging Technologies: Law, Policy and Ethics (Phoenix, May 20-21, 2013). This international event was organized by the Center for Law, Science and Innovation at Arizona State University, and the ISSP was among the fourteen sponsoring organizations. I hope that it will become an annual event – it was, without any doubt, a great success.

Imagine a truly eclectic group of scholars discussing the governance of “GRINN technologies” (genetics, robotics, information technology, nanotechnology, neuroscience) – the entire range of issues leading to what appears to become a truly post-human future.

Who was there? – A multitude of professions, sometimes embodied in a single person. For example, the opening keynote was given by a physicist, who became a nanotechnology policy expert and science communicator, and then a manager of a risk center (Andrew Maynard) – he provided innovative thoughts about innovation and introduced the concept of technological innovation as “societal insurance.” The conference continued in the spaces among science, technology, ethics, law, sociology, economics, and political science. The new hot expertise: holistic perspectives. The new challenge: we need to be more holistic.

Mind you, there was real breadth and some certainties emerging from the collective debates. There is consensus that the future will be radically different. Don't think about the Jetsons; think about revolutionary changes to the labour market (white collar jobs are no longer secure), health care, the legal system, and so forth – issues that deserve policy attention here and now. The topic of emerging and disruptive technologies is not only of interest to academics but also to businesses, policy makers and society, as a recent McKinsey report shows. The issues are truly global because technology diffusion is simultaneously an economic and moral doctrine, a direct result of collapsing costs, and a bit of a regulatory headache.

But there were also some constraints on breadth and a bit of bewilderment. We discussed with great optimism and gusto our talent for problem identification, and accepted our limitations to formulate clear, workable solutions. This topic is, of course, very complex, the stakes are high, and ideology always comes into play when the uncertain future is under discussion. Personally, I missed an interest in debating global governance, world regulation, and even world government. It struck me as odd how little the topic came up during the multitude of talks presented at the conference. When I brought it up with colleagues in the corridors, I got a lot of receptivity. It's not a new idea, of course, but it remains difficult to discuss in all seriousness. The trust in international organizations is not stellar, and both the United States and Canada appear reluctant to engage in international agreements. Many feel intuitively that

international diversity and policy experimentation will be more fruitful than a monolithic regulator pronouncing standards from afar.

Yet, the lack of true international integration of regulation and technology governance is also problematic, and raises the realistic worry about a race to the bottom with respect to oversight, the emergence of regulation and “ethics-free” zones, DIY high-tech, and difficulties with international quality control.

What is the right scope? I am painfully aware of the dilemma Buzz Holling put so well in a 1998 editorial: If we pursue highly tailored, atomistic approaches, then we may end up providing good solutions to the wrong problems – but if we pursue an encompassing, holistic approach, then we will likely end up offering vague solutions to the right problem. In other words, there are limitations and benefits in both, the microscope and the “macroscope,” as French scholar Joël de Rosnay put it in 1975. These old insights need to be taken seriously.

Can we pull off a two-pronged approach? Yes, of course we can. Truly holistic world-thinkers can cheerlead the right perspective, and interdisciplinary tribes of scholars can tackle specific questions and projects. The former define the right questions in dialogue with the latter, who use evidence, argument, and expertise to provide meaningful answers. If we build the required capabilities into our education system now, then we will ultimately succeed. The ISSP intends to play its part in this project through its graduate program, scheduled to launch in the fall of 2014.