

Governance of emerging technologies: Aligning policy analysis with social values

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Emerging biotechnologies hold great promise but could pose great risks. However, the benefits and costs are often difficult to anticipate and hard to quantify, and they can vary widely among the populations and environments.

How can we make wise policy decisions about emerging technologies—decisions that are grounded in facts yet anticipate unknowns and promote the public's preferences and values? A new special report from The Hastings Center examines the options and proposes improvements. [Governance of Emerging Technologies: Aligning Policy Analysis with Social Values](#), edited by Hastings Center research scholars Gregory E. Kaebnick and Michael Gusmano, is the product of a National Science Foundation-supported project at The Hastings Center. Gusmano is also an associate professor of health policy at Rutgers University School of Public Health.

The report focuses on the predominant method used to evaluate new technologies in the United States, cost-benefit [analysis](#). CBA aims to understand the public's preferences for certain policy options—such as whether to halt, restrict, or promote the application of a new [technology](#)—by linking those preferences to a common metric, such as the amount of money that people are willing to pay for something that would be produced or destroyed by the application.

Proponents of CBA point to its relative objectivity, "in the sense of being scrubbed of bias, of fairly representing the views and interests of

the overall population," write Kaebnick and Gusmano in the introduction. "It tries to ensure that there is no thumb on the scales when a decision is made." But critics say that CBA can fail to recognize important values, such as justice and equity in the distribution of benefits and harms to different populations.

All agree that there is room for improvement. The report has three major takeaways.

First, it advances understanding of how CBA handles the public's values. ["Demystifying Evidence-Based Policy Analysis by Revealing Hidden Value-Laden Constraints."](#) by Adam M. Finkel, a senior fellow at the University of Pennsylvania Law School, breaks new ground by cataloging a multitude of specific choices that policy analysts must make, which appear to be value neutral but are in fact "suffused with hidden value judgments." He argues that we are best off sticking with cost-benefit analysis, but that we must be aware that it is rife with unexamined value choices that ought to be examined carefully. "Transparency—the dogged task of highlighting where each value judgment enters the analysis and why—is the only productive path forward," he writes.

Another takeaway is that the institutions that carry out policy analysis may be as crucial for impact assessment as the decision-making tools like CBA. Several commentaries propose and begin to explore new kinds of institutions, such as "governance coordinating committees," to coordinate perspectives from multiple sources in a trustworthy way. The commentaries also examine different mechanisms for public engagement.

Finally, the report outlines a new approach to technology assessment that incorporates a refined understanding of precaution. Precaution is usually understood as a rule or principle that generates policy positions such as

bans or moratoria that erect strong barriers to science. But the last two essays argue that precaution should be understood as a way of thinking about policy positions: it is contextual and pragmatic rather than a kind of algorithm. "What is distinctive about precaution, in this new understanding, is that it calls for a bit of public second-guessing," says Kaebnick, commenting on the essays. "It asks for a pause or slowdown in a decision about technology so that we have time to reflect, and it asks for a wide and long-run understanding of outcomes, a willingness to look at alternatives to whatever is being assessed, a broad view of the values that should be reflected in [policy](#), and overall transparency in how the decision is being made."

More information: [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10... 48.issue-S1/issuetoc](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9781119488888.ch48.issue-S1/issuetoc)

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