

Social scientist questions methodology of climate services technology firms

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Jesse Keenan, a social scientist at Harvard University, who also specializes in climate risk and adaptation strategies, is publicly calling out climate services technology (CST) firms for their questionable

methodologies. He has published a Policy Forum piece in the journal *Science* in which he claims the work done by CST firms lack transparency.

As [global warming](#) continues, some in the [business world](#) have found that there is money to be made by advising other companies on how to prepare for the changes that are coming. Such services are meant to alert clients to problems they may face that could adversely impact their bottom lines—setting up new plants or office buildings in likely flood zones, for example. While the idea seems sound, the way it is being carried out may not be. Keenan points out that CST firms are using their own modeling and data analysis systems to come up with their risk assessments for clients—but they are doing it out of sight. There is no oversight or verification. No peer review. They simply ask their clients to trust them. Keenan suggests such a lack of transparency is reason for concern. Not only do such "black box" technologies raise integrity questions about the science regarding results, they also are likely to raise questions about the actions that are taken by clients—especially public entities.

Keenan acknowledges that CST firms have little reason to reveal how they arrive at predictions or risk assessments, or how they advise their clients—doing so would put them at risk of losing business to competitors. Still, he insists there are ways to improve the process—starting with ensuring that [public officials](#) truly understand the contracts they sign. He also suggests that public entities look into the data CST firms use—some of it may have originated from other public entities, which means it should be freely available for review. He also notes that clients could insist on private review of black box technologies. Government entities could also set up rules for how black box technologies can be set up and operated—such as an insistence on [best practices](#)—particularly if they involve giving advice on public infrastructure or national security projects.

More information: Jesse M. Keenan. A climate intelligence arms race in financial markets, *Science* (2019). [DOI: 10.1126/science.aay8442](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aay8442)

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