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THE PUBLIC PICKED OPTION X, NOW WHAT? BOLSTERING NASA'S DECISION-MAKING  
PROCESSES BY APPROPRIATELY SOLICITING PUBLIC INPUT

**Abstract**

Spurred by President Obama's Open Government Directive in 2009 and the America COMPETES Reauthorization Act in 2010, US government agencies like NASA are shifting their perspective on the role of the public with respect to their mission. While there is strong support for increased public engagement, particularly in how social and moral implications of government programs are assessed, the extent to which the public can meaningfully engage in complex technical decisions is still an open question. As a first step towards understanding the appropriate role for public input to government technical decision-making processes, this paper draws on evidence from NASA's recent Expert and Citizen Assessment of Science and Technology (ECAST) event, to explore (1) the ways that the participants handled and interpreted complex technical information relevant to the presented choices, and (2) how those choices can be most effectively communicated to decision makers. By comparing the content of the table deliberations to the participants' individual written submissions (the communicated outcome), we found that negative assessments were underreported and that important information about the participants' reasoning was lost. This is important when the input being sought is entangled with an uncommunicated technical assessment. For example, a participant believes that minimizing technical risk is important, and that Option X is less risky. If asked if she prefers X or Y, she will respond X, but will not illuminate what comprises the assessment of risk. The decision maker is unlikely to perceive the relevant message, and could incorrectly impose their assumptions on the participant's submission. We explore the reasons that certain types of information were filtered out and suggest how further research can improve how public input is solicited in the future.