

What can I say? Geoscientists as participants in debating our energy needs

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Where and how we get our energy, how we commoditise and use it, and the consequences for people and the environment are inherently ethical as well as technical matters. These questions sit at the heart of debates about whether and how we can live sustainably on our planet.

Geologists who come in contact with debates about sourcing and using energy, either as active participants and advocates or as apparently neutral ‘technicians’, are therefore thrust into a series of (sometimes fraught) ethical battles for which they may be ill prepared. They may choose explicitly to comment on the relationship between their technical work and its wider societal and ethical implications – but even to remain silent on these matters is an ethical choice. Furthermore, what may appear purely technical scientific activities and statements are ‘value-laden’, shaped by cultural, political, economic and personal framing assumptions.

This raises some difficult questions. What should be our ethical framework as scientists when we enter into these techno-ethical spaces? Should we attempt to tease apart the scientific and non-scientific elements of what we do, say and write – or is this a hopeless or pointless task? How should we decide when to speak up and when to keep quiet? Is it acceptable or desirable for scientists also to be advocates and activists, or does this undermine their independence and therefore their authority as ‘experts’ with something useful to say?

My presentation will explore some of these questions, in the context of contested topics such as shale gas, radioactive waste disposal and CCS (carbon capture and storage). It will also ask whether our present codes of professional and scientific conduct, whether formal or informal, are adequate for these challenges.