

Making a Positive Impact IRL:

Opportunities and Challenges for Bridging Engineering, Research & Policy Divides

Dr. Rebekah Tromble

Director

Institute for Data, Democracy & Politics

George Washington University

Institute for Data,
Democracy & Politics

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

The Ideal

- Research informs engineering
- Engineering feeds back into research
- Lessons from both inform evidence-based policy-making

Potential for Engagement

- Researchers and engineers within companies
- External researchers with internal engineers
- Researchers and engineers within academia and civil society

Challenges for Engagement

- Researchers and engineers within companies
 - Competing incentives within companies
 - E.G., Trust & Safety vs. Business
 - How valued are non-engineering teams/voices?
 - Culture of engineering above all else
 - Different training and perspectives
 - Social dynamics often feel too “messy”
 - Engineering often feels too “rigid”

Challenges for Engagement

- External researchers with internal engineers
 - Access to data
 - User privacy
 - Independence
 - Judgement from outside (“sell outs!”)
 - Inequality of relationships

Challenges for Engagement

- Researchers and engineers within academia and civil society
 - Different training and perspectives
 - Different norms
 - Academic publishing
 - Engagement w/ corporations

Potential for Policy Engagement

- Public engagement, particularly via media
- Advisory boards
- Outreach *from* policy staff
- Outreach *to* policy staff
- Regulatory agencies

Challenges for Policy Engagement

- Hard to do while within a company
- Distrust of companies, especially those that have lobbying influence
 - Policy staffers especially distrustful
 - If your company killed their bill...
- Fear of regulatory capture
 - “Why aren’t they hiring anyone with expertise???”

Promising Avenues

- Integrity Institute
 - <https://integrityinstitute.org/>
- Coalition for Independent Technology Research
 - <https://independenttechresearch.org/>
- Pressure from engineers inside companies