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communication and the public

Academic Dialogue

Communication and the Public
2025, Vol. 10(4) 231–247

DOI: 10.1177/20570473251392285
journals.sagepub.com/home/ctp
Sage

The past, present and future of research on communication policy and technology: An academic dialogue

Julia Pohle[1], Robin Mansell[2], Hopeton S Dunn[3], Cees Hamelink[4], Francesca Musiani[5] and Rohan Samarajiva[6]

Abstract

This conversation is an account of the panel discussions held during the Communication Policy and Technology 50th Anniversay pre-conference, co-organised by the Communication, Policy and Technology (CPT) Section and the Global Media Policy (GMP) Working Group of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), and the Department of Communications & New Media and the CivicTech Lab at the National University of Singapore on July 12, 2025. The session brought together long-standing CPT Section members with current and former co-chairs. Exchanging diverse viewpoints, the participants reflected on past, present and future challenges of research on communciation policy and technology and its potential impact. The conversation emphasised the importance of critical research in addressing issues related to power, human rights, ethics and inequality within both global and national communication policy.

Keywords

Communication policy, critical research, global south, human rights, inequality, infrastructure, internet governance, power, technology

Julia Pohle (Moderator): I'm very honoured to be: moderating the first session of this pre-conference of IAMCR's Communication Policy and Technology (CPT) Section.[1] With the aim of looking back at 50 years of this section, we invited longstanding members and former section heads to reflect on the changes and the continuities over

[1]WZB Berlin Social Science Center, Germany
[2]London School of Economics and Political Science, UK
[3]University of Botswana, Botswana
[4]Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands
[5]CNRS, France
[6]LIRNEasia, Sri Lanka

Corresponding author:
Julia Pohle, WZB Berlin Social Science Center, Reichpietschufer 50, 10785 Berlin, Germany.
Email: julia.pohle@wzb.eu

the past decades. I hope we will have a lively conversation on the history of communication policy research within, but also beyond, IAMCR.

Cees Hamelink, I believe you were never head of the communication policy section but one of its key members and, of course, president of IAMCR.

Cees Hamelink: I was president of the IAMCR from 1990 to 1994 and was very instrumental in establishing the section. That was not 50 years ago. Actually, the first IAMCR section related to technology was established in 1959. This was called the Technology and Economy Section. Only in 1970 did we discover the communication satellites, and then the next stage was the Satellite Section, headed by Dallas W. Smythe, later to be followed by William H. Melody.[2] It was in 1990 that we established the Communication Technology Policy Section with Robin Mansell as chair. So I would say let's celebrate today 35 years of existence of a very influential, very relevant and very robust section of the IAMCR that the Association can be very proud of indeed.

Julia Pohle (Moderator): Thank you. We counted from 1974, the creation of the Satellite Section. But I trust you when you say there was something before that. I fully agree that there was an important change in 1990 when Robin Mansell introduced the focus of 'policy' in the title of the section. On our panel today, we also welcome Rohan Samarajiva, who was the chair of the section from 1994 to 1998, and Hopeton Dunn, a former IAMCR Secretary General, who chaired the section between 2002 and 2010. And finally, we have Francesca Musiani, who was, together with me, vice-chair and later chair from 2017 to 2023. Of course, many more chairs and vice-chairs played an important role in shaping the section's profile, but we are delighted to welcome five generations of section heads to this panel today.[3]

I would like to open this panel with an invitation to look back over these past decades from your regional and thematic perspectives and to ask you what you see as the most crucial shifts in communication policy research over the last 50 or 35 years.

Cees Hamelink: In answer to your question about whether over these decades shifts in communication policy research can be seen: as an academic association, we have become more active in the policy field, especially in the context of the UN debates on the New International Information Order (later to be called the New World Information and Communication Order NWICO) and the UN World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS).

Unfortunately, from the thematic perspective that I hold to be the most existentially crucial – namely, the promotion and protection of human rights – there has been no significant shift. As an association, we never did put human rights in the driver's seat.

In 1976, when I became for the first time a member of the International Council (IC) of IAMCR, I was also a member of the UN Advisory Panel on Technology and Human Rights. This panel prepared for the UN General Assembly

the proposal that the United Nations should install a mechanism for a human rights assessment of new technologies. Would new technologies meet human rights criteria, would they protect human rights or would they violate human rights? This was proposed to the UN General Assembly in 1975. The General Assembly applauded and then – in the following years – did nothing about it. This is not uncommon for UN General Assembly practice.

However, in the IC meeting of IAMCR, human rights were put on the agenda. We began talking about communication rights and later addressed issues such as the Salman Rushdie *fatwa* and freedom of speech. But no coherent, substantial policy on human rights was developed. In the 1990s, IAMCR had a committee on human rights, but that lived only for two years and then went away into the darkness.

So I would say that there should have been a shift from not really paying serious attention to human rights issues to making these a real highlight in our work. And I think that particularly this CTP Section could take the lead in such a prominent field and make a difference.

Julia Pohle (Moderator): Thank you, and I fully agree that the critical perspective of the section in its research looking at questions of rights and human rights is of high importance. But it is always at risk of being overtaken by other types of research.

Robin Mansell: Thank you for inviting me. I want to confirm – Cees is right. There's a much longer history to this section than 50 years. One point that stands out going back to 1959 is that, at least until 1990, the word policy wasn't associated with the section. It was variously about technical studies, technology satellites, technology and satellites, or communication satellites and technology. And when William Melody was running the section from 1980 to 1990, it continued to focus on communication technology. However, I was his PhD student, so I know that he was very interested in policy; it just wasn't reflected in the name of the section.

When I came along, I somewhat controversially added policy to the name, so it became the communication technology policy section. During my tenure as head of the section, people started grumbling and I thought it must be about me! Actually, it was about the fact that information technology 'users' (a word I did not like very much) were not being adequately reflected in the work of the section. And this concern made us move towards rethinking the section's mandate.

Over time, the section became more and more about both the structural and political economy aspects of what was happening with technology *and* the micro-level user-oriented considerations. I didn't change the name of the section again, but it later became "communication policy and technology" – a fine distinction, some might say, but it mattered because this change put an even greater emphasis on policy relevant not just to technology but also to those who experience the technology.

I have some reflections on what we were talking about up to the time when I became Section Head. I am talking about the late 1980s and the

early 1990s. My observation is that not a lot has changed in terms of power relations and power asymmetries. We were talking about regulation and market liberalisation. We were talking about the United States (US), about Europe and about Eastern Europe. We were also talking about Russia and multilateralism. We were investigating unbundling information services and the development of infrastructures. We were talking about 'information highways', a US influence. We were also talking about cost and pricing issues, and there was quite a lot of economic analysis in what we were doing. There was work on electronic trading networks, which today might be called platforms. So issues around electronic commerce and platforms were a major research theme in the section.

Another major theme was about what I called, as did a lot of other researchers, design considerations. The focus was not just on the technology, but on what design decisions were being made by which actors to fashion the communication system and what is now called the information and communication ecosystem. At that time, there was more and more overlap between our section and the Law Section of IAMCR. The legal institutions, including human rights considerations, were coming up on the agenda, and there was the already mentioned user issue. There was quite a lot of discussion about unpacking the 'black box' of technology. This term had come into our field from Nathan Rosenberg (1982, 1994), who was working on technology innovation, and it resonates today when we talk about unpacking algorithms and artificial intelligence (AI). There was a lot of discussion about control of technology gateways, and today, there is still much concern about controlling the dominant Big Tech companies. In addition, social communities, privacy and security issues were very much present on the section's research agenda. There was a lot of work on data services, but just the beginnings of work on datafication, a word that was already being used occasionally.

The final point I want to make is about uneven power asymmetries in network control structures. There was discussion in the section about asymmetries of power between the East and the West, but also between what is now called the Global North and the Global South or the Global Majority World. When I think about what has changed, this is reflected in the terminology we use to describe technology, whether AI or platforms or mis- and disinformation, algorithms and assemblages. But the underlying dynamics of what this section is concerned with have not changed very much. That is either a sad comment on the impact that the section has had on real-world decision-making, or it is an optimistic statement about the fact that we have to keep on pushing for respect for people's concerns and rights, which are left out of too many conversations.

Rohan Samarajiva: IAMCR sections do not have impact – people, individuals, do. Universities don't have impact. Universities shouldn't take positions on the great issues of the world. People who are in universities should, and they should take stands

and engage in advocacy. So I'm not worried about what the section is called. I spent, say about 10 to 15 years with this section, and it was my primary academic home. I came to my first conference in the then Czechoslovakia in Prague as a graduate student in 1984 with Robin Mansell.

The year 1984 was significant because that was when AT&T, the world's largest company at that time, was broken up. And there are some who would argue – and I agree with them, although I don't think it is a proven case – that the breakup was a factor in the rise of the internet. At least, it made the internet feasible. The emergence of the internet happened sooner because of that. And then British Telecom and Nippon Telegraph and Telephone (NTT) in Japan were privatised – all of this happened in 1984, right? It was a significant year – including the fact that I went to IAMCR for the first time. But I was more interested in what was going on outside the university than inside.

I've been trying to get away from the university pretty much all my life, and I finally did in 1998. The last CPT Section event that I had to coordinate at IAMCR's 1998 conference in Glasgow, was organised very well, but not by me. Robin Mansell did it for me because she was the previous chair, and I was a regulator in Sri Lanka running around trying to do reforms. If you think of academic researchers as being the supply side and the demand side being people in government who use that research and do things with it, I joined the other side. You could call it the 'dark side' or whatever, but I went to the demand side. And on the demand side, some of the people in this room, like Yuli Liu, have become regulators. I think we have had all kinds of impacts as individuals. I do not count impact in terms of publications; I count impact in terms of people who have changed things.

There was an interesting piece that I came across several years ago. I think one of the co-authors is here, so I read it last night: Bram Dov Abramson, Jeremy Shtern[4] and Gregory Taylor wrote about the notable absence of communication policy researchers in Canada from a major Canadian telecommunication policy review (Abramson et al., 2008). And they went beyond that. They invited somebody from the standards organisation, and that person said that she did not get anything from these researchers. So you need to think about that larger problem: who are we addressing with our research? Are we talking to ourselves? Impact in universities is typically measured by how many publications and citations you have. That is how you get the promotion and recognition. Or do you measure impact in terms of changing the world?

Hopeton Dunn: Greetings, everyone, I'm delighted to be here. I come from the Caribbean, as some of you may know, though I live and work on the African continent. I served as chair (and later co-chair with Jo Pierson) of this section for almost a decade (from 2002 to 2010). It was a time when we benefited from the legacy of our peers and our predecessors, who had wrestled and contended with many of the controversial issues of the section's formation. So we were able to focus our efforts on how we are going to mobilise research from

different parts of the world in order to try to make a difference in the life of IAMCR.

During the period that I served – or for at least a greater part of it – this section was the leading section in IAMCR in terms of number of members and conference presentations. And one of the factors that drove the growth of this section was our close association with the Emerging Scholars Network (ESN). During my time, we really placed an effort on engaging with and bringing in those who were coming to us as students and early stage scholars from different parts of the world. I believe that paid off in terms of the section's sustainability, as even now many of them are leading the Association.

At the time, we were concerned with issues of global disparity, especially represented by – in the early stages – news agencies as well as big organisations like Cable & Wireless in the Caribbean and parts of Asia. How were governments dealing with these entities? How were the United Nations and governments trying to come to terms with the many issues related to conglomerates and the associated disparities, especially in the Global South?

It was during my time that we entered into full-blown research and engagement with something called the internet, which had been emergent but exploded during that particular timeframe. And we looked not only at the technology. One of the things we had learnt from our predecessors is that this section isn't simply about technology. We aren't just admirers of technological change, but instead we are engaged in critical scholarship to look at the extent to which these technologies were affecting people's lives, communities and access.

Francesca Musiani: Thank you for having me. I am really delighted to be part of this anniversary panel. Whether we have an actual 50-year anniversary right now or not, I don't know, but I'm happy it happens.

Thank you, Hopeton, for mentioning the ESN. Before being a vice-chair and then co-chair of CPT at the end of the 2010s and early 2020s, I was also chair of ESN in the early 2010s. This gives me the opportunity to say that a close collaboration with ESN is indeed a specificity of CPT that we have always tried to foster. It has always made for very lively sessions that were revealing of less established research and gave more emphasis to work in progress. That work was quite eloquent, both in terms of topics and technical objects that could be of interest to the section, but also in terms of novel theoretical and methodological approaches to address them.

In the period I was co-chair of ESN, then of CPT, we were witnessing what my colleague Romain Badouard (2017) in France has called the 'disenchantment of the internet'. It followed a previous time in which there had been a wave of enthusiasm for the potential of the internet – for things like democracy, the protection of human rights, the right to communicate and the opening up of emancipation and participation dynamics by means of technology. In the 2010s, we were taking an increasing interest in

figuring out progressively that, indeed, measures had been put in place that dealt with this and fostered these dynamics. But there were also a number of dynamics that had historical import or were fostered by the technology but were not going in that direction.

These dynamics were reinforcing issues of imbalance and power reconfigurations that always went to one side and very little to the other. I think that maybe CPT has helped to enlighten and bring a critical perspective to this disenchantment with the internet and digital technologies. With a bit of optimism, one could say that despite the disenchantment, there has always been in the section's programme a place for what was and is going on in terms of participation, community and resistance. These dynamics are what we do want to foster as much as possible in our scholarship and policy impact when we have the opportunity.

Probably, it was also the decade in which science and technology studies (STS)-oriented perspectives fully and explicitly came into the work of the section to analyse the extent to which power could be inscribed into technologies, or how technologies could be co-opted for a variety of political reasons. These issues became as relevant for CPT policy and technology as the more historical and institutional perspectives concerning technologies.

In terms of users – thank you, Robin, for bringing that up – because this has also frequently been part of our discussions with Julia Pohle (the moderator), with Aphra Kerr[5] and with Jeremy Shtern. During our 10 years together, the extent to which uses of communication technology could and should be part of the CPT programme was an issue each year during the conference preparation. From a very pragmatic standpoint, it was also a matter of putting some kind of perimeter around the papers that we accepted for the section. The way we managed in recent years was to try to figure out the policy dimension of studies that focus primarily on the use of technology and the extent to which presentations were just examining uses of technology with no clear or potential link to policy aspects. We decided that these submissions were not for us. But at the same time, there is perhaps no very clear place in IAMCR for this type of contribution apart from our section. So this has always been a matter of open debate for us.

Julia Pohle (Moderator): Thank you very much. It is interesting that all of you brought up questions of power and the question of critical research. As Francesca mentioned, something we still struggle with in the section is that over the years we see an increase in submissions that do very standardised technology user studies, often with quantitative methods that miss a critical perspective. That's why we established that one of the selection criteria for being accepted into the conference programme was that there is a critical perspective in the research regarding power and policy dimensions. We no longer accept presentations that simply study technology or users without any critical reflection on what their

research means for the broader issue beyond a single case study.

Since you all mentioned different kinds of power relations, I would like to ask what you see as the biggest power struggle that we are witnessing today? How do these power struggles affect communication policy and why is it important? Jeremy Shtern, who is currently IAMCR's Secretary General, mentioned in his welcoming remarks to this pre-conference that we hope to see studies on power relations in communication governance and communication policy by looking at these issues from an historical perspective. I think we all appreciate the historical perspective. And since we are here to speak about the history of the CPT section, I hope we can reflect on why it is so important to consider the historical dimension of power relations when we look at what is going on at the moment in communication governance.

Hopeton Dunn: Power dynamics and power relations have had a substantial presence in the work that we have done in this section over the decades. It has resided with us, and it continues to reside with us. The issues are: who is dominant? Who is listened to? Who is heard? From what parts of the world are alternative voices coming? Who are the marginalised voices and why? This includes the historical sources of economic power, issues of technology access and the geo-political relations affecting the global post-colony.

My observation on these decades is that we really were not moving a great deal. We needed to take more into account issues of the anti-colonial struggles to regain and capture the voices of the often voiceless in the formerly colonised sections of the world. This includes the business of deconstructing colonial institutions like Cable & Wireless and Reuters to make way for indigenous information structures and policies that address community life. That's been one of the big struggles in the world related to our section. We have also had the related struggle to decolonise the curriculum and to make sure that what our students are studying isn't just coming from one part of the world. That came with an imperative for many of us to also write and publish in order that our students can read and be motivated to do the same. So it is about the power of ideas and whose story is told by whom. A big part of what we have been through is the related struggles with globalisation. Are the technologies emerging from on top, globalisation from above, or are we managing to cut some kind of channel so that we can emerge in the world with a perspective that differs from the dominant world view?

These struggles continue today in the struggle for access. In many different forms, that struggle has not gone away. In some parts of the world, there is less emphasis on access and more on inclusion and the quality of access and so on. But there are still many parts of the world where it's not yet a post-access discussion. It's still a focus on 'are we online'? I have discussed with my colleagues in the African continent and in the Caribbean, this anomaly between the affordances of *AI* and then what I call the deficits of *IA*, which is internet access. While one part of the world is driving forward

with new cognitive and neural networks, another part of the world is just coming to terms with 'am I getting online'? These are some of the critical issues of power. There are many of them. Many of them have not changed.

Rohan Samarajiva: In 1984 or so, I published something on NWICO. I went back to Sri Lanka one week after my PhD. My intention was to live there, and so I came face to face with all the dysfunctions of the Sri Lankan state. And I realised that the whole NWICO debate was anchored on strong states. The focus was on colonialism and imperialism and on Cable & Wireless and all these companies when, in fact, the actor depriving my people, not only of telephone connections, but even of a dial tone, was the state.

The joke in those days was that half the world is waiting for a telephone and the other half is waiting for a dial tone. The state monopoly was what was depriving people of these things. So a few years later I had the opportunity to bash the state monopoly to pieces and to beat the hell out of it. By that time, the Sri Lankan incumbent telco had 35% Japanese ownership and the Japanese were managing the company. But the Japanese investment came from NTT, which was also a state-owned company. So the managers from NTT shared the monopoly mindset. I understood the complexity of power relations not when I was studying in Canada, but when I was dealing with the reality of power in these contexts.

As a regulator, I had all these people coming with proposals for global mobile personal communication (GMPCS) by satellite from companies such as Iridium. I was of a mind to say 'let's go'. Let's have them. Why not? And now we just licensed Starlink. I didn't, the government did. Let's go. You don't like Starlink? Throw it in the lake. Do something else. But that is how you get internet access. It is by creating opportunities, by loosening up, the restrictions. I was working with one of the young CEOs at the time I was a regulator. I too was young then, but he was younger. He's sort of the digital czar of Sri Lanka right now. And he said in an interview recently that because of what we did back in 1997 or thereabouts, not one cent of public money has been spent on giving people internet access, not one cent. All we did is that we created a regulatory environment and the private sector did all the investment, and now we have actually passed the peak number of computers in Sri Lanka. We were at 22% of the population about three years ago. Now we are down to 20% because for most people the mobile phone does everything. A smartphone is more powerful than the computer that I started with. It can do more than a desktop computer for most people.

Robin Mansell: I'll tell you a little story. For the last two years, I had the privilege of being a scientific director for a global project on information and democracy (Mansell et al., 2025). It was about mis- and disinformation, news media, AI and data governance. It involved over 300 researchers from around the world. Our job was to undertake a global critical assessment of research on some of the biggest, most challenging, policy issues, from the perspective of different regions – Global North and

Global South. We did that and a couple of things struck me which speak to issues of power. Having been cocooned in the LSE, teaching critical theory most of my career and wandering out occasionally, I paid less attention to the continuing hegemony in academic research of certain deterministic ideas about technology and about the media.

After having reviewed more than 3,000 scholarly contributions published over the past few years across disciplines (media, communication, law, sociology, computer science, etc.), the 'media effects' tradition was found to be alive and well. Research in this tradition is very prominent in journals, but much of it doesn't consider power relations. It works with the old sender–receiver model of information as if there is no political context. We found very little cross-citation between work in this tradition, which is receiving the vast majority of funding, and critical studies on issues that are much more commonly discussed in this section.

I didn't expect there to be that much of a divide between the people working on media effects and on critical studies in 2025. In our project, we tried our best to encompass different perspectives from countries and regions around the world, which means that we did not propose a universal template of what we should do in response to the power of Big Tech. We did try to inflect our analysis with critical observations on power asymmetries that matter. We also found that studies of top-down governance by states are much more present in the academic literature than studies of bottom-up voices and inclusion with different discourses from civil society.

I was invited to present the results to an intergovernmental organisation, and before the session, they told me that I should not use words like Big Tech, power or hegemonic because some delegations such as the United States would be upset. So I presented, and I did use those terms because they're in our publication. What do we learn from this? In my earlier remarks, I said, not much has changed. But I think that what has changed is the presence of work by various coalitions of actors, whether they be civil society or researchers, who are working as activists and who are doing remarkably interesting policy-relevant work around these developments in their countries. They are trying to inform the rewriting of legislation, whether it's on security, data protection or human rights. So the struggle goes on, and the most interesting work we came across that did address power asymmetries was not in the academic journals, especially not in the top-tier academic journals. It was in the grey literature or policy reports and in the shorter pieces where people are struggling to bring together their work and to get their voices heard.

Cees Hamelink: Following up from this, it is no surprise that you were told not to use certain concepts. I was happy that you, Julia, used the phrase power struggle. I think it is promising because it suggests that there is still a struggle going on. Whatever you may think about the American president, the charm of Donald Trump is that he is very clear: there are no power struggles, there are only negotiations, and I win all of them. I

think that may indeed be the reality. You can talk until the cows come home, but against this Goliath, there are no Davids.

The question is whether we as an academic community could make a difference. Would critical research make a difference? In our past, IAMCR was considered to be the research arm of UNESCO, and we had a very intense working relationship with this UN agency. Whatever we may have done, that friendly alliance is no longer a reality. An additional problem is also that if there is a power struggle, we really have to fight most of it with our own increasingly bureaucratic universities that over time have become increasingly system-supportive. Critical research is under duress from our governments but even more at risk from our own universities. Universities have become commercial institutions that train for professions and not for critical thinking. You will have a real problem to get the help of your university for critical studies of modern technologies. Many universities prefer to spy on their own students rather than fund studies on spyware. We should also be realistic about the relation between research and government. There are very few government officials anywhere in the world who sit desperately waiting for the next research report and who want to implement research findings in their policy proposals. Most couldn't care less. Policy research usually ends up in the wastepaper basket.

My hope is that the millions of people around the world who are today completely domesticated to use products of advanced technology that they never asked for, one day will say no. I am a great believer in civil disobedience, in a revolt against the global zombification that now takes place in our world. Maybe one day people will leave their little screens, and they will talk with each other as in times past. People have the power to realise they are engaged in massive digital slavery and can be disobedient. Here I think as a research community we could make a difference. We could help people to liberate themselves from a dependency they never asked for. This requires that we become transdisciplinary. Transdisciplinary research now involves the people for whom the research is intended. That would be a promising perspective for the future.

Francesca Musiani: This is at times depressing, I have to say, but not without reason. I want to add the issue of the international multi-stakeholder arrangements for internet governance versus what is currently happening in the different regions of the world seeking to differentiate themselves from one another by means of digital autonomy strategies. One of the current core struggles for me is this: the fact that the internet governance community – or communities in the plural – has been building a number of institutions that serve either to distribute decision-making power or to simply discuss issues related to internet governance. They do this with the hypothesis, grounded in experience, that not only states should and can deal with internet governance related issues, but that this is a more global matter and a matter concerning other types of actors too. What we are currently

seeing are strategies that are explicitly labelled as 'digital sovereignty', or not explicitly labelled as such but are pretty much in the same register of trying to reduce one's dependency and increasing one's digital autonomy. These strategies go in the direction of making the institutions of global internet governance irrelevant, or at least of relegating them to discuss specific issues and recognising them as not useful.

This is a priority for different nation states in the world. And this is also reducing the space for resistance and disobedience. I've been working on Russia since 2018, and the last decade and a half has been incredibly enlightening in terms of how digital sovereignty and digital autonomy strategies can reduce the space for resistance despite the best attempts of citizens and communities within or outside Russia. This is an example of the current struggle to keep some global and multi-stakeholder institutions of internet governance alive in a world that is regionalising and that is seeing a return of the states – if they had ever gone away, which is to be debated.

The fact that some states are prioritising their autonomy and, in some cases, their isolation, is causing some substantial collateral issues for the security and stability of the internet in many regions, but also at a global level. I think one of the challenges ahead is to study these dynamics. We also have to ask ourselves theoretical and methodological questions about how we try to do meaningful research on Russian internet governance when we cannot any more go safely into the territory or do any sort of ethnography or even in-depth interviews with Russian internet actors. Not because it is difficult for us, but because we are putting them at risk by doing so. So we also need to have a discussion about sensitive fieldwork and what to do in those contexts.

Julia Pohle (Moderator): Thank you very much. It is an important point: the spaces in which we can do critical research are shrinking. (. . .) I would like to open up the panel to questions from the audience.

Audience 1: After hearing each generation of the chairs and your priorities and what you have worked on, I'm curious to learn about now and the future. What would CPT or IAMCR priorities be looking at today and into the future? What are some of the top issues on your agenda? (. . .)

Professor Hamelink, I heard your comments about the United Nations. I worked for the UN for 20 plus years, and I am now at the United Nations University Institute of Macau. (. . .) We are at an intersection, as we are a UN organisation, but at the same time, in our genes, we are academics, so we share the same goals as you. We want to promote policy-relevant research. We also want to use our research and teaching education to move on global policy. So my second question is how can you and the UN work together?

Audience 2: I would like to express my gratitude for the very enlightening thoughts from all the speakers. Enlightening, but also worrying. They have talked a lot about history, and I got the impression that the world we live in today is getting more unequal in terms of our regions. But I come here to hear some hopeful narratives. My first

question is whether there is something positive, something hopeful that I can carry home? And it relates to my second question about the way to move forward. Where should we start from here to make the world that we live in today become more equal? (. . .).

Audience 3: (. . .) My question is about globalisation and internet governance. Since we all talk about the crises we are facing around the world, I'm a bit pessimistic about the future of global internet governance arrangements since we can see that platform companies are getting involved in geopolitics, and we can see more and more fragmentation and divergence between different regions around the world. So we are also talking about how we can make platform governance and internet governance more regionalised. My question is whether there is still some kind of global internet governance in the picture?

Francesca Musiani: I will comment on the question about possible priorities. In this regard, we need to refer to the theme of this year's main conference of IAMCR that is related to the environment, and we haven't mentioned the word yet. I want to bring it in before this session is over. A number of questions that are related to the environment and digital technologies are very much policy questions in all the senses that we have been discussing. And we are bound to do more to answer them, at least I hope so.

And this ties in with saying something that is hopeful, because good scholarship can have an impact. I think that we can bring these two issues meaningfully together in terms of addressing the materiality of digital technologies, and how it impacts the relationship between the environment and technology. Choosing where to establish data centres, what cables to put in the oceans and so on are very much policy questions. In this regard, history can enlighten us, since submarine cables have a long history. And we can ask some questions that have been asked by historians for the sake of the environment and the sustainability of our future and present digital ecosystem.

Hopeton Dunn: I appreciate the questions, and many of them are closely related. Firstly – although you will probably hear from someone like myself critical remarks about the insufficiency of progress in relation to access and concerns about the rise of network dominance – it isn't the same as saying that there has not been progress. We are now seeing more global scholars coming from different parts of the world. We are seeing more activities coming from the Global South and so on. It's not enough, and we need more visibility and space. We are emergent. Please be reminded that the First Industrial Revolution (Feng, 2023; Williams, 1944) was one of deprivation and extraction from the colonised world. In this current era, we want inclusion and not to be left behind again or to be exploited, despite being in the global majority. That is where I think the challenge is, and while there is some progress, it is just not enough.

With respect to what kind of research we want to see in the future, I would like to see more emphasis on two very simple things. One, I want to see more

research linked to ethics. I want our section to include and engage more with the concept of ethics and technology because I think that's a space where we sometimes don't fully recognise what is the truth, what is reality, what is proper, appropriate and so on. And the second is I want to see more indigenous research. There is not only more research coming from the Global South but also from First Nations, from people with a completely different perspective. And that is where we are going to see some of the environmental strengths coming through. People who have lived it through thousands of years and can share their experiences with us now.

Rohan Samarajiva: I think the post-war global order is done. I think regionalisation is in. There are all these people talking about the fragmentation of the internet and should the internet be capitalised with the 'I' or without the 'I'. That's all toast. The real world is fragmented. That means that there will be some institutions that will cut across, trying to maintain a semblance of the post-war order. But the President of the United States described our countries as 'shithole countries'. We know where we stand from his perspective, so now we've got to rearrange ourselves in the Asian environment, and it will be an interesting ride. There is going to be a lot of uncertainty. And if you want a hopeful insight: uncertainty leaves open many opportunities, many possibilities. That's how I see it. We can do great things in conditions of uncertainty.

Robin Mansell: The biggest priority going forward would be criticising and working against the hugely dominant imaginary of technological inevitability. It's been said and said, but at nearly every AI conference technological change is treated as inevitable: 'It's here'. 'It's coming'. 'Let's just adapt'. 'We'll just put some guardrails in place'. Critiquing that notion is a huge ongoing responsibility of researchers.

More hopefully, I think that we need to be paying attention to – and this follows on from a regional emphasis – the hugely diverse regional, sub-regional, local initiatives being taken by cities and by groups who are coming together to reimagine business models, to push back against the dominant platform model that is globalising everywhere. This is hopeful because there are many individuals who don't necessarily come to conferences like IAMCR because it's expensive, but they are working on the ground.

They are trying to influence decisions that are being taken by policymakers at every level. And typically what they do is to put language and rules in place which try to respond to global governance initiatives but deviate from them because they are responsible and responsive to local conditions. Sometimes they do this in ways that are not very consistent with human rights obligations; at other times, they are consistent in working towards greater respect for human rights and ethical behaviour. Whichever they do, this is happening at the local grassroots, national and sometimes sub-regional level – and not by

providing a governance template at the global level.

Cees Hamelink: Following up from you Robin, I do think that indeed the activities on local levels, grassroots community levels, are really crucial because they give us hope. Rebecca Solnit (2016) in her book *Hope in the Dark* encouraged us to focus on the very small victories that are daily won all over the world. Initially, I have found that a very difficult issue because I come from the sixties' generation that believed in total and permanent revolution. But over time you learn to be very happy whenever small changes can take place. They give enormous hope.

Secondly, taking Robin's point about the inevitability of technology, what we should really see is that technology is inevitably becoming the servant of autocratic regimes around the world. More than 70% of the world's nations are now ruled by autocratic regimes, and the number is only increasing. As a European, I want to remind us of how little alert we were in the 1930s when fascism grew. Fascism is back. It has never been conquered, but after the Second World War, it globalised thanks to the anti-communist policies of the United States. And one of the main instruments that fascism uses is advanced technology in the form of AI. We should be more aware of this as we read all these programmes and visit conferences about 'AI for good'. Please remember that AI was never designed for good. It was designed for domestication, suppression and control. It was never designed for the welfare of humanity, and we should be critical about it.

Now to the question about cooperation with the UN. I am sure that IAMCR would love to work with the UN University Institutes, as we worked with the UN University of Peace in Costa Rica. We should realise, though, that the UN never became what it was supposed to be: an organisation of peoples of the world. So I always claim the UN should be called the United States, although that may cause some confusion. The UN brings all the misery of state bodies – their unreliability, aggression, competition and hypocrisy – to all the world's political issues. Since, to some extent, the United Nations University has managed to stay out of that, as IAMCR, we could collaborate with you. Let's talk about cooperation!

Acknowledgements

The 50th Anniversary of Communication Policy and Technology pre-conference was funded through the generous support of the 2025 Spotlight Grant from the Department of Communications & New Media at the National University of Singapore, as well as 2024 Sections & Working Groups Funding from the IAMCR. The pre-conference was hosted by a local organising committee, Professor Weiyu Zhang (CPT current co-chair), Associate Professor Renyi Hong and Assistant Professor Jun Yu. Student assistants, including Jingyi Xie, Yuheng Wang and Gina Fu, provided essential support. The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funders or the local organisers.

ORCID iDs

Julia Pohle https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9442-4626
Robin Mansell https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3950-3468
Hopeton S Dunn https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2973-0747
Francesca Musiani https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8343-6122

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. The authors of this text would like to thank Weiyu Zhang from the National University of Singapore, currently co-chair of the CPT section, for convening and hosting the pre-conference, including this panel discussion.
2. The Satellite Section was headed by Dallas W. Smythe (Canada) until 1978, when its name was changed to the Communication Satellites and Technology Section. From 1980 to 1990, the section was named 'Communication Technology' and headed by William H. Melody (Canada).
3. In 1998–2002, the Communication Technology and Policy Section, as it had been named since 1990, was chaired by Ursula Maier-Rabler (Austria). She was followed by Hopeton Dunn (Jamaica) and Pascal Verhoest (Belgium), and later Jo Pierson (Belgium) and Aphra Kerr (Ireland).
4. Jeremy Shtern is currently Secretary General of IAMCR and previously served as vice-chair of the CPT Section from 2019 till 2023.
5. Aphra Kerr served as vice-chair of CPT from 2012 till 2016, and as chair from 2016 to 2019, jointly with Francesca Musiani and Julia Pohle as vice-chairs.

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Author biographies

Julia Pohle is co-head of the research group Politics of Digitalization at the WZB Berlin Social Science Center and senior associated researcher at the Brussels School of Governance and the Center for Internet and Society of the CNRS. Her research focuses on digital geopolitics, global communication governance, digital sovereignty and internet governance. She has been co-chairing IAMCR's CPT section since 2017.

Robin Mansell, FBA, is Professor Emeritus, Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science. She was Scientific Director, International Observatory on Information & Democracy, Paris project on on Information Ecosystems and Troubled Democracy. Her research focuses on media and communications regulation and policy, digital platform governance, privacy and surveillance.

Hopeton S Dunn is Professor of Communications Policy and Digital Media at the University of Botswana and Senior Research Associate at the University of Johannesburg. He served as Director of the Caribbean School of Media and Communication (CARIMAC) at the University of the West Indies for six years. He is a former Secretary General of the IAMCR, the first such senior elected post-holder from the Global South. He currently chairs IAMCR's Stuart Hall Awards Committee.

Cees Hamelink is Emeritus Professor of International Communication at the University of Amsterdam and Honorary President of IAMCR. He serves as Editor-in-Chief of the *International Communication Gazette* and is currently Athena Professor for Global Health and Human Rights at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, as well as Professor Internacional at Universidad Autónoma del Estado Hidalgo, Mexico.

Francesca Musiani is Research Professor at the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) and

director of its Centre for Internet and Society. Her research explores themes of internet governance, digital sovereignty and cybersecurity through a science and technology studies perspective. She was vice-chair and then co-chair of IAMCR's CPT section from 2017 to 2023.

Rohan Samarajiva works at the intersection of economics, law and technology. He founded LIRNEasia, a think tank active across South and Southeast Asia. He was Chair of Sri Lanka's ICT Agency and Director General of the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka.