Call for abstracts:

The Political Power of Information Technology Industries

ICA 2025 pre-conference

To be held at the University of Denver, June 12, 2025, 9:00AM – 4:30PM

Abstract submission deadline: January 31, 2025

Affiliated with the Communication, Law and Policy Division and the Media Industries Interest Group of ICA

Sponsored by the *Institute for Information Policy at Pennsylvania State University* and the *Underwood Institute*

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The information technology (IT) industries occupy a powerful position in society. They develop, operate and sell key data infrastructures and devices that enable major social and political processes to take place (Plantin et al., 2018). Ownership of these infrastructures gives them "privileged access" (Srnicek, 2017, p. 44) to user activities and great wealth. These provide them in turn with significant power that directly impacts the political rights as well as conditions of people worldwide. Within their infrastructures, these industries often operate as if they own fiefdoms, enjoying broad powers to shape and restrict users' behaviors, and designing systems that grant users feudal power over others (Schneider, 2023).

In the past, the IT industries - including software, hardware, storage, and internet platforms - were reluctant to participate in political life and overtly exert power but rather turned to the construction of computational devices and networks as alternative spaces for individual fulfillment (Turner, 2006). However, in recent years, IT firms (Dror, 2015) and entrepreneurs (Creech & Maddox, 2022; Karppi & Nieborg, 2021) have been more explicit in their public commitments and interventions. They have used their access to data to promote particular political agendas and "choreograph publics" (Murray & Flyverbom, 2021, p. 630) consonant with both their narrow corporate interests and more general social visions. They provide political campaigns with technical assistance (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018) and regulate political speech (Kreiss & McGregor, 2019). They have influenced public policy domains such as education in ways that promote the adoption of the systems they develop and the values they espouse (Davidson et al., 2024; Sims, 2017; Tamir & Davidson, 2020). In some areas, such as national security, the state has relied on IT firms to carry out core political functions

by proxy (Chachko, 2021; Feldstein, 2021). Prominent IT executives and entrepreneurs claim the authority and jurisdiction to participate in moral debates well beyond the confines of the industry (Daub, 2020), and network celebrities connected with these industries do so as well (Turner & Larson, 2015). Some industry personnel participate in political activism leveraging their occupational identity and social status as technology experts. In many of these cases, the industry's power is not only mediated by the socio-technical systems it develops but is also applied using direct interventions (Eyal & Buchholz, 2010) which rely on human interaction and social discourse. In reaction to these interventions and the increased power of the industry more generally, governments (both national and supra-national) have acted to curb industry power or shape it for their own needs sometimes in a bid to deepen systems of political control (Feldstein, 2021; Hutson, 2023). In addition, governments often restrict foreign firms and maintain close ties with domestic ones (Huang & Tsai, 2022).

Given the more proactive role the IT industries play in political life we wish to ask in this pre-conference: How do the IT industries intervene in political campaigns? How do these industries shape the public policy process through lobbying, donations and consulting, both in relation to media and internet policy and in relation to broader policy domains? How do their products algorithmically affect the political process? What role do industrial actors play in opposing, or supporting and sometimes leading activist movements? How do industrial actors intervene in intellectual debates? and how do governments respond to industry interventions and/or co-opt the IT industries for their own purposes?

In posing these questions and related ones, we welcome theoretical and empirical contributions that draw on diverse methodological approaches (qualitative, quantitative, and computational) to interrogate these industries' political role around the world nationally and trans-nationally in both democratic and authoritarian regimes.

Submission topics could include but need not be restricted to:

- Intellectual interventions such as lectures, media appearances, news coverage, podcasts, blogging, social media, think-tanks, official testimony, and industry research

- Political dimensions inherent to the design and functioning of IT platforms and services

- Lobbying and other forms of participation in the public policy process

- Corporate, investor and worker activism

- Political donations

- Participating in and supporting political campaigns and other elements of the formal political process

- Supporting, providing, or replacing state functions

- National and supra-national policy related to the IT industries

Workshop Organizers: Institute for Information Policy, Penn State.

Submissions: Interested scholars are invited to submit a 500-word abstract by January 31, 2025. Authors of selected papers and abstracts will be notified by February 21, 2025. Full papers based on invited abstracts are due May 12, 2025. Proposals and papers should be sent by e-mail to the Workshop Organizers at pennstateIIP@psu.edu. Inquiries should also be directed to that address.

Registration Fee: There will be a $50.00 registration fee for participants to cover the cost of food and refreshments during the Workshop. Limited funding will be available to waive the registration fee of at least some graduate student attendees who will be presenting at the pre-conference.

Following the pre-conference, authors will be invited to submit a full paper for potential inclusion in a peer-reviewed special issue of the *Journal of Information Policy*.

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