

IPA2026BRP05 / Critical Policy Studies in the Age of Digital Imperialism, Sovereignty Crises & Tech Races

Topic : IPA2026BR / Panels

Chair : Guilherme Cavalcante Silva (York University)

Second Chair : Regine Paul (Max-Planck-Institute for the Study of Societies, Köln, Germany)

Third Chair : Preeti Raghunath (University of Sheffield)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

As a field of study, Critical Policy Studies thrives on exposing power relations in policy processes, foregrounding discourse, interpretation, and social constructions as means of democratizing knowledge generation and collective decision-making amid global and local power surges and deepening inequalities. In our current times, this agenda meets a shrinking democratic space, the rise of authoritarian and oligarchic power, and intensified corporate and techno-political control. CPS must defend interpretive, reflexive inquiry against epistemic capture that sidelines critical methodologies and forms of agency in this new phase of concentrating politico-economic power (de Freitas Boullosa et al. 2023; Paul et al. 2024).

In particular, the simultaneous rise of digital imperialism, digital sovereignty projects among state actors across the globe, and weaponized tech races represent an attack on the progressive, participatory and epistemologically pluralist agenda of CPS. Silicon Valley and Chinese Big tech companies reach out across the world in extractivist and exploitative ways, the US and China increasingly weaponize these firms' geo-economic power (Adams 2024; Srnicek 2026), and middle powers across the globe prioritise digital sovereignty projects (Doshi and Delgado 2025; Monsees and Lambach 2022; Seidl and Schmitz 2023). As a result, policy and governance projects across all scales and levels are increasingly dominated by logics of economic and military competitiveness, revived sovereignty concerns, technocratic and economic knowledge generation, and desires to control populations through technical means (Cavalcante Silva 2025; Dattani 2023; Paul 2024; Raghunath 2026). Taken together, these dynamics sideline alternative projects of democratic and socio-economic reproduction.

From this broad context, several fields of tension emerge for critical policy research and practice:

While agency and autonomy are key requirements for emancipatory governance, they also become increasingly nebulous in the digital age. On the one hand, technologies such as AI agents tend to crowd out human decision-making on the ground, on the other hand, strong There Is No Alternative (TINA) discourses of needing to lead, catch-up or benefit from tech races decrease the room for political discussion of policy proposals. What does this double squeeze on agency do to participatory spaces for uttering critique, thinking about progressive alternatives, and enacting emancipatory tech projects in different contexts? What role and scope is there for non-state actors, such as labour unions, social movements, or more marginalised communities to shape tech futures?

The imperial logics of technology development and uses in governance projects come with a strong analytical focus on the triad of digital empires (usually meaning: the US, China and perhaps the EU) and the global reach of powerful corporations. While tending to such global hierarchies is important, it also disavows experiences and agency in the majority world (Amrute et al. 2022). The same is true for "lead" technologies, where little attention is paid to smaller community technology projects than to the global reach of products by OpenAI, Meta, Transsion or Huawei. How can we analyse policy and governance in ways which bring together both global dynamics and local articulations of tech capitalism? How are state and non-state actors carving spaces, both small and large-scale, for more autonomy within tech governance? To what extent can attention to the variegated nature of tech markets help identifying pockets of resistance (Mügge et al. 2026)?

At the same time, attempts to resist, decenter and decolonise dominant technologies – for example by developing indigenous and non-English Large Language Models – also risk reproducing global hierarchies such as infrastructural dependence on the US and Chinese stacks and integration within a capitalist order. The same is true for "digital sovereignty" claims by states or municipal actors, who often either become yet another imperial producer and exporter of a tech stack within their world region, or reify the imperial power of existing hegemony. How does – and, from a normative viewpoint: how can – policy and governance, social mobilization, and critically-minded knowledge generation contribute to the creation of progressive alternatives?

Lastly, there is a tension within emancipatory discourses around digital technology. In Brazil and India, for

example, attempts to create alternatives in the development and public sector deployment of technologies such as artificial intelligence draw on promises of sustainability, green growth, or social inclusion (Cavalcante Silva 2025; Parsheera 2024). In Europe, democratic norms and fundamental rights have become the legitimacy underbelly of creating EU-made tech alternatives (Paul 2024). To what extent do such discourses carry the seeds for progressive tech and governance futures vs. reproducing forms of extractivism, capitalist accumulation, and domination? And how do structures of knowledge generation in the complex technology/ policy/governance enable or constrain the emergence of alternative ideas and ideologies?

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CALL FOR PAPERS

Inspired by reflections about these – but also other thinkable – tensions, the panel aims to bring together an interdisciplinary set of scholars (both early career and more senior) from across the globe to explore the space for and role of critical policy studies in the age of digital imperialism, digital sovereignty projects and global tech races. We welcome conceptual, methodological, empirical and policy-practice contributions which go beyond reflections on individual "cases" (as orthodox policy comparisons would have it) and reflect on connections of technology governance sites across scales, space, time, and different techno-social systems, and which employ critical-interpretive methodologies. Submissions which speak explicitly to the critical-interpretivist remit and spell out we can navigate the tensions we formulate in this call, in research or policy practice.