# P218 / Rethinking Power in Artificial Intelligence Policy

**Topic :** Knowledge, Science and Expertise in Policy Process

**Chair :** Inga Ulnicane (University of Cambridge)

**Second Chair :** Roxana Radu (University of Oxford)

## GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

This panel aims to examine the role of power in Artificial Intelligence (AI) policy. One of the defining features of the field of AI is a high concentration of power in a small number of Big Tech companies from the United States (e.g., Google, Amazon, Microsoft) and China (e.g., Alibaba, Tencent, and Huawei). This high concentration of power has major economic, political and social implications, including influence on AI policy (Khanal et al 2025; Ulnicane 2027). As AI technologies are diffused across all sectors of society from public services and law enforcement to education and health, it is crucial that AI policy protects public interests, fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens. The high concentration of power in a small number of Big Tech companies, raises major questions of how well public policy represents public interest; what kind of influence Big Tech has on agenda setting, and whose interests dominate in AI policy-making?

Research has demonstrated how Big Tech has exerted influence on AI governance and regulation directly through lobbying, regulatory capture and ethics washing as well as indirectly by funding research and civil society organizations (Bradford 2023; Gorwa et al 2024; Rikap and Lundvall 2021). At the same time, important questions can be asked about more subtle and less visible ways of how Big Tech attempts to influence public discourse by promoting ideas and discourses that fit their interests (Foucault 1980).

Against this background, this panel invites to revisit and rethink the concepts of power and the relationship between power and public policy in the context of fast-developing AI policy. What dimensions of power, including direct decision-making, indirect agenda setting, and preference shaping are at play in AI policy (Lukes 2004)? What forms of power - structural, institutional and ideational - can be observed in AI governance and regulation and how do they interact (Béland 2010; Carstensen and Schmidt 2016)? Do we encounter cases of power-over, power-to and power-with in AI policy-making (Pansardi and Bindi 2021)? How well do existing concepts of power help to analyse AI policy? What kind of theoretical, conceptual and methodological advancements are needed?

To advance our understanding of power in public policy, this panel examines the following questions about AI policy:

- How does high concentration of structural, institutional and ideational power in a small number of Big Tech companies from the US and China shape agenda-setting, priorities and outcomes of AI policy nationally and globally?
- What is the impact of the power of Big Tech in AI policy on global inequalities and the Global South?
- What are opportunities for civil society organizations, affected communities and marginalized groups to resist and challenge the power of Big Tech in AI policy?
- Are governments and public sector organizations reinforcing or reshaping power asymmetries in AI governance?
- Is power in AI policy only constraining and coercive or can it also be enabling and emancipating?

## CALL FOR PAPERS

AI policy is being developed and implemented around the world in the context of high concentration of power in a small number of the US and Chinese Big Tech companies raising urgent questions about opportunities to protect public interest in AI governance and regulation. Against this background, this panel treats AI policy as a critical case to rethink power and its role in public policy.

To deepen our understanding of the role of power in public policy, this panel invites theoretical, conceptual, methodological and empirical papers from academics from various disciplines, policymakers and practitioners from around to world focusing on topics, including (but not limited to):

- The distribution of power in AI policy among Big Tech, civil society and government, and its implications for

AI governance;
- The roles of and relations between structural, institutional and ideational power in AI policy;
- Power-over, power-to and power-with relationships in the context of power asymmetries;
- Methods and approaches to study and measure different types of power, including more subtle and less observable ones; and
- Ways of challenging, resisting and equalizing power in AI policy around the world.

Accepted papers will be a part of a broader conversation to advance our understanding of power in AI policy theoretically, methodologically, empirically and practically setting out a novel collaborative and transdisciplinary research agenda and developing actionable recommendations for practice.

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