
Centre for International
Governance Innovation



Conference Report – Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, May 16–18, 2024

Knowledge as Power in Today's World

Nikolina Zivkovic, Reanne Cayenne, Kailee Hilt
and Paul Samson



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About CIGI

The Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) is an independent, non-partisan think tank whose peer-reviewed research and trusted analysis influence policy makers to innovate. Our global network of multidisciplinary researchers and strategic partnerships provide policy solutions for the digital era with one goal: to improve people's lives everywhere. Headquartered in Waterloo, Canada, CIGI has received support from the Government of Canada, the Government of Ontario and founder Jim Balsillie.

À propos du CIGI

Le Centre pour l'innovation dans la gouvernance internationale (CIGI) est un groupe de réflexion indépendant et non partisan dont les recherches évaluées par des pairs et les analyses fiables incitent les décideurs à innover. Grâce à son réseau mondial de chercheurs pluridisciplinaires et de partenariats stratégiques, le CIGI offre des solutions politiques adaptées à l'ère numérique dans le seul but d'améliorer la vie des gens du monde entier. Le CIGI, dont le siège se trouve à Waterloo, au Canada, bénéficie du soutien du gouvernement du Canada, du gouvernement de l'Ontario et de son fondateur, Jim Balsillie.

About the IGLP

The Institute for Global Law and Policy (IGLP) at Harvard Law School is a collaborative faculty effort to nurture innovative approaches to global policy in the face of a legal and institutional architecture manifestly ill-equipped to address our most urgent global challenges. Global poverty, conflict, injustice and inequality are also legal and institutional regimes. The IGLP explores the ways in which they are reproduced and what might be done in response. We aim to provide a platform at Harvard for new thinking about international legal and institutional arrangements, with particular emphasis on ideas and issues of importance to the Global South. Professor David Kennedy serves as institute director.

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Centre for International Governance Innovation

67 Erb Street West
Waterloo, ON, Canada N2L 6C2
www.cigionline.org

Table of Contents

vi	About the Authors
1	Introduction
1	Discussions
3	Agenda
5	Participants

About the Authors

Nikolina Zivkovic is a research associate at CIGI, where she contributes to the planning and execution of research output and provides advanced research support.

Reanne Cayenne is a program manager at CIGI, where she oversees the operations and research output of the Digital Policy Hub program. Her role also involves policy research and analysis related to research areas of the Hub and other CIGI research priorities.

Kailee Hilt is a program manager and research associate at CIGI. She focuses on public policy issues tied to emerging technology, privacy and cybersecurity.

Paul Samson is president of CIGI and has more than 30 years of experience across a range of global policy issues, working with international partners from around the world. He is currently focused on the transformation of the global economy through digitization, scenarios for an evolving world order and institutional global governance challenges.

Introduction

On May 16–18, 2024, the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) hosted the conference “Knowledge as Power in Today’s World,” in partnership with Harvard University’s Institute for Global Law and Policy (IGLP). This initiative brought together a diverse network of disciplines, including sociology, history, political science and law, to address the challenges posed by rapid technological advancements and their implications for governance. The conference, held under the CIGI Rule, allowed information to be shared freely while protecting individual attribution.¹ This summary highlights some key points from the conversations.

Discussions

The initial discussions emphasized the swift and significant impacts of globalized contemporary issues and dove into the convergence of technological change and governance, a focal point for IGLP faculty and CIGI. Stressing the necessity of interdisciplinary approaches to understand modern governance complexities, the event fostered debates and alliances. Participants were encouraged to contemplate the broader societal impacts of issues, while enhancing their comprehension of the underlying power and authority structures, cultures and interests inherent in technological innovation.

During the dialogue, participants highlighted significant challenges in interdisciplinary communication, particularly regarding terms, such as “hallucinations” in artificial intelligence (AI), which can be misunderstood or be misleading. This disconnect reflects the tendency for disciplines to operate in isolated silos with their own specialized language. Participants stressed the importance of translating technical terms for lay audiences and promoting cross-disciplinary dialogue to mitigate bias, misalignment and negative social impacts. The varying foci within fields, such as economists prioritizing efficiency over legal considerations, underscore the need for enhanced communication and understanding

of diverse perspectives to facilitate a more comprehensive approach to governance.

In exploring knowledge as power through genealogy, the discussion examined how historical contexts shape our collective understanding. Genealogy traces the development of ideas, revealing how past events and ideologies influence our present. Reflecting on historical pathways and uncovering origins helps us understand the continuity of our actions. This analysis enables a more critical assessment of narratives surrounding technological advancements and governance, facilitating a deeper understanding of their depth and challenges.

The conversations also examined the intertwined roles of experts, citizens and politicians in power and governance, scrutinizing the tension between democracy and technocracy as governance evolves from stable frameworks to more adaptable arrangements. Notably, the impact of language on decision-making processes sparked discussions on power dynamics and authority within democratic systems. Emphasizing the necessity of disciplinary boundaries, the conversations underscored the significance of acknowledging diverse perspectives and fostering effective connection among them to tackle intricate governance challenges in our interconnected world.

Discussions on the empowerment of knowledge in society analyzed how humans, the material world and knowledge interact to shape understanding and perception. Key themes included the credibility and persuasiveness of knowledge, the roles of authorization and responsibility, and the production of knowledge claims. Participants reflected on how technical experts construct theories within composite political and managerial environments, stressing the rule of law and its invocation in exerting power.

Discussions further expanded to include topics such as non-ownership, where individuals viewed themselves as components in larger systems, raising questions about power dynamics and structural biases. The fundamental role of individuals and agencies within the context of technology was discussed in detail, accentuating the importance of understanding how knowledge is deployed and transformed based on values and ways of knowing. Participants discussed how initiatives at the intersection of technology and innovation, such as research programs

¹ See www.cigionline.org/about/cigi-rule/.

at CIGI, can benefit from this understanding. It was noted that knowledge is not abstract but is shaped by individuals and influences personal and societal constructs. Technologies, as embodiments of knowledge, are not neutral and come with inherent considerations that shape our understanding and actions.

Lastly, a significant theme was the contextual nature of knowledge, with the focus on its translation across scales from local to global. The discussions addressed the formation of “knowledgeable selves” among scientists and citizens, which shape policy and societal norms. Participants assessed science’s political role, alternative knowledge paradigms and the dynamic nature of knowledge production. Considering AI’s influence on knowledge, discussions also explored its effects on institutional structures and societal alignment, prompting reflections on the future of knowledge, governance and political consensus.

At its core, the dialogue underscored the need to integrate diverse knowledge forms. In summary, the colloquium discussions outlined the importance of the following:

- **Enhancing interdisciplinary communication:** Bridging gaps between disciplines is crucial for better assessment of complex issues such as evolving AI and governance.
- **Understanding the authority of knowledge:** Recognizing that knowledge is shaped by individuals’ values and contexts underscores its application and legitimacy in society.
- **Exploring governance dynamics:** Examining the interplay between democracy and technocracy prompts reflections on power dynamics and decision-making processes, emphasizing the importance of diverse perspectives.
- **Analyzing historical and genealogical roots:** Considering the historical origins of current knowledge and governance practices provides a better understanding of the present and the potential future.

→ **Assessing technology’s impact on knowledge:** Particularly within the context of AI, technology significantly influences knowledge production and governance, necessitating explicit consideration of its implications and biases.

→ **Developing knowledgeable identities:** The journey to becoming knowledgeable involves navigating complex knowledge realms, with stakeholders recognizing the broader implications of their roles.

Agenda

May 16, 2024

- 9:00–9:30 a.m. **Opening Plenary**
- 9:30–10:45 a.m. **CIGI AI Round Table**
Overview of key developments in the rapidly evolving and broad space of AI: science and technology; opportunities and challenges; and ethics, policy and governance.
- 10:45–11:15 a.m. **Break**
- 11:15 a.m.–12:30 p.m. **Social Theory Round Table I: Making Time and Space**
Ideas about history and geography — what is close and far, what is then and now — give shape to society, governance and policy. How are these frames established, contested and changed?
- 1:00–2:00 p.m. **Lunch**
- 2:00–3:15 p.m. **Small Group Conversation 1: Are Law and Regulation “Before,” “Beneath,” “Behind” Science?**
The idea that law “lags” behind science and technology, which flow forward with the force of an unstoppable river, is treated as common sense by lawyers and scientists alike. And yet legal arrangements also constitute the actors and incentives, which are the headwaters and channel for that river, just as technologies of various kinds undergird law’s form and authority. How might we better imagine these interactions, and why do resistant imaginations encounter such resistance?

May 17, 2024

- 9:00–10:15 a.m. **Governance Round Table I: Technocracy, Expertise and Democracy**
The expert, the citizen, the politician: Are these different roles, overlapping roles? Or different vocabularies, different positions in a single conversation — on power, on politics? Are “democracy” and “technocracy” compatible — are they that different?
- 10:15–10:45 a.m. **Break**
- 10:45 a.m.–12:15 p.m. **Small Group Conversation 2: Progress, Improvement and Perfectibility in Law and Science?**
The arc of justice, the process of enlightenment: the promise that history has a direction, that it is meliorist, the aspiration that human projects in science and law bend toward truth and justice. What work are these ideas doing in the interactions between science and society?
- 12:30–1:30 p.m. **Lunch**

2:00-3:15 p.m.

Social Theory Round Table II: Making Knowledge in and for Society

How is knowledge made powerful? How does power express itself as knowledge? How are the technologies of making, validating and expressing knowledge as power disciplinary? Epistemic? Cultural? Social? Institutional? Psychological? All of the above?

3:15-3:45 p.m.

Break

3:45-5:15 p.m.

Small Group Conversation 3: Knowledge, Property and Political Economy

The production and authority of knowledge practices occurs within — and often reinforces — a specific contemporary political economic relations both locally and globally. Is this a boon or bane? And for whom? How to trace the distributional infrastructures and implications of contemporary knowledge practices? What is law's role in shoring up or reforming them?

May 18, 2024

9:00-10:15 a.m.

Governance Round Table II: Making Self and Society: Climate, Life and Data Sciences

Who is the “scientist” (the designer, the maker, the user)? How do the “natural sciences” make, reflect or co-produce ourselves and our society? What is — or ought to be — the proper place of science in constituting society's conditions of possibility?

10:15-10:45 a.m.

Break

10:45 a.m.-12:15 p.m.

Small Group Conversation 4: Expertise and Ideology in Governance

How might we untangle the impact of ideas in the broadest sense on the legal, institutional and policy practices of governance? The knowledge practices specific to governance often contrast “expertise” with “ideology” and “interest.” Does it help or hurt — whom and how — to blur or dissolve this boundary?

12:30-1:30 p.m.

Lunch

1:30-2:30 p.m.

Final Plenary

Participants

Aziza Ahmed
Boston University

Nader Andrawos
Harvard Law School, IGLP

Daniel Astone
Harvard Law School, IGLP

Nicole West Bassof
Harvard Kennedy School of Government

Joel Blit
CIGI; University of Waterloo

Margarita Boenig-Lipstin
ETH Zurich

Reanne Cayenne
CIGI

Robert Chu
Grundrisse Group

Richard Clements
Tilburg University

Seamus Darby
Harvard Law School, IGLP

Dennis Davis
High Court of Cape Town

Deval Desai
Edinburgh Law School

Karen Engle
University of Texas at Austin

Dianna English
CIGI

Tracey Forrest
CIGI

Alex He
CIGI

Kailee Hilt
CIGI

Zeina Jallad
Harvard Law School, IGLP

Sheila Jasanoff
Harvard Kennedy School of Government

Rose Karoro
Harvard Law School

David Kennedy
Harvard Law School

David Kershaw
London School of Economics and Political Science

Yukiko Kobayashi Lui
University of Waterloo

Nadia Lambek
Western University

Brice Laurent
Mines ParisTech

Lou Lennad
Harvard Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

Jimmy Lin
University of Waterloo

Connor McGlynn
Harvard Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

Zina Miller
Northeastern University School of Law

Scott Newton
SOAS, University of London

Albert Podusenko
Eindhoven University of Technology

Nik Rajkovic
Tilburg University

Pariroo Rattan
Harvard Kennedy School of Government

Kerry Rittich
University of Toronto

Paul Samson
CIGI

Aaron Shull
CIGI

Hilton Simmet
Harvard Kennedy School of Government

Nicole Stybnarova
Harvard Law School, IGLP

Kristen Verdeaux
Harvard Law School, IGLP

Robert Wai
Osgoode Hall Law School

Dina Waked
Sciences Po Law School

Justin Wong
Harvard Law School

Nikolina Zivkovic
CIGI

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67 Erb Street West
Waterloo, ON, Canada N2L 6C2
www.cigionline.org