

## [CfP: Histories of technology acceptance in the 20th century](#)

Announcement published by Fabian Zimmer on Monday, December 12, 2022

Type:

Call for Papers

Date:

February 10, 2023

Location:

Germany

Subject Fields:

Business History / Studies, Contemporary History, Environmental History / Studies, History of Science, Medicine, and Technology, Modern European History / Studies

The Division of History of Technology at TU Berlin invites proposals for a two-day historical workshop taking place on **5-6 October 2023**. The workshop will feature a keynote by Ortwin Renn, Scientific Director of the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS), Potsdam.

Deadline: **10 February 2023**

The public acceptance of technological innovation is seen as a decisive factor in current technology-related issues and debates, be it around the transition to renewable energies or the reshaping of mobility and food systems. In short, it's integral to a number of fields linked to the grand challenges that our contemporary societies face. The concept of "technology acceptance" has frequently been critiqued on several grounds: 1) It naively assumes acceptance of technological innovation as the norm. 2) It thus renders critique, resistance, or even reluctance as deviant and thereby only worthy of attention because of said deviance. 3) It conceptualizes the public as well as local stakeholders as passive, giving the term a technocratic tinge. Despite these critiques, "technology acceptance" served and still serves as a pivotal concept in public debates, policy advice, and in social science research on issues such as infrastructure projects, NIMBY-ism, participatory planning processes, the role of prosumers in socio-technological transitions, or in more general assessments of public attitudes towards innovation.

In light of the critiques levelled at "technology acceptance," the aim of this historical workshop is twofold: On the one hand, it will carve out the history of concepts and knowledge practices related to what is today called "technology acceptance." On the other hand, it will historically enrich the current critique by spelling out the political and ideological implications of concepts of "technology acceptance."

The question of public acceptance of technology has a long tradition in the history of technology. Indeed, during the last few decades, historians of technology and scholars from adjacent fields have tried to move away from a top-down model of "technology acceptance" and have developed strong heuristic tools to investigate the public and social negotiations around technological innovations and their success, failure, or modification. Concepts such as the "cultural appropriation" of technology (Hård and Jamison 2003), the "co-construction" of technology and society (Oudshoorn and Pinch

2005), or, more recently, “public technologies” (Trischler and Bud 2020), have highlighted the impact of users and the public in the shaping of technology. In practice, however, concepts of “technology acceptance” have not lost their appeal to public policy makers and remind us of the power dynamics and hierarchies inherent in historical and current innovation processes. Historical studies have furthermore investigated numerous public conflicts around new technologies or infrastructure projects, and they have described public discourses of technophobia (Sieferle 1984) as well as technophilia (Segal 1985) and their variants (Nye 1994, Rieger 2003). We thus have a relatively good theoretical and empirical basis for assessing past public attitudes towards technology. What we lack, however, is a second-degree history, a history of concepts, discourses, and knowledge production about what is today called “technology acceptance” and of how this knowledge has been put into practice as a social engineering tool.

This is where this workshop wants to focus. We invite scholars – particularly early career researchers – working in the history of technology, STS, environmental history, economic history, history of consumption, history of knowledge, history of science, or any other field with a historical interest in issues of technology acceptance to submit paper proposals for a two-day international workshop taking place at Technische Universität Berlin on 5-6 October 2023. We are looking for contributions concentrated on – though not limited to – 20th century Western Europe and that investigate the following questions: How did various stakeholders in innovation processes conceptualize acceptance of technology in the past? How did they develop strategies for fostering acceptance and how did they put them into practice in specific contexts? How did the addressed audiences resist, appropriate, and reformulate these calls for acceptance? And how did they enact positions of what we might call “non-acceptance”?

In sum, we are looking for contributions which follow one or several of the following three closely interlinked lines of investigation:

1. *Concepts*. As an analytical term in social science, “acceptance of technology” came into use in the 1980s (Williams and Mills 1986), along with parallel developments in other languages (such as the German *Technikakzeptanz*, see Rothenhäusler 2018). A nuanced genealogy of the concept has to closely consider these terminologies and needs to go beyond explicit formulations of “acceptance” to trace the development of various discourses around the acceptance of technology – of “adapting to” new technologies, of “conforming to” technology, of “adopting” technology, etc. It also must extend its investigation to before the 1970s and 1980s, as those decades are marked by a fundamental shift in public attitudes towards technology. Such a long-term perspective will shed light on the deeper history of the concept and highlight changes as well as continuities of a linear model of innovation that is as implicit in past notions of “adapting to technology” as it is in current notions of “acceptance.”
2. *Actors*. We are interested in case studies of the role institutions, associations, or individuals played in conceptualizing technology acceptance. This encompasses: a) actors aiming to foster acceptance, such as engineering associations, specific corporations and their marketing, human resources, and public relations departments, etc.; b) actors resisting and appropriating these claims, such as alternative research institutes, local protesters, or critical journalists and intellectuals; and c) actors mediating between the two positions, such as the actors in Technology Assessment, consumer associations, or in some cases, state institutions.
3. *Practices and media*. Finally, we are interested in the practices and the media formats and

contents that facilitated the production and circulation of knowledge related to technology acceptance. These encompass practices and media that can be roughly categorized into three fields: a) *popularization*: marketing, advertisement, public relations, industrial fairs, technological education in schools; b) the fields of *applied sciences* concerned with exploring and fostering acceptance and identification with technology in various contexts, such as industrial psychology, human factors, or market research; and, finally, c) the field of *participation* formats developed since the 1970s at the latest, such as the various forms of citizens' juries and conferences, but also more spontaneous forms of public protest.

The funding application for this event is pending. If successful, travel and accommodation costs for the invitees will be covered. We envisage a publication of the contributions in a special issue. Speakers are invited to present in English; contributions should not exceed 10 minutes as the discussions will concentrate on pre-circulated papers.

Please submit your application (abstract of about 400 words and a short academic CV) by 10 February 2023, to Fabian Zimmer ([fabian.zimmer@tu-berlin.de](mailto:fabian.zimmer@tu-berlin.de)). The applicants will be notified in February 2023. If accepted, a paper of 10–15 pages shall need to be submitted by 31 August 2023.

Contact Info:

Fabian Zimmer

Institut für Philosophie, Literatur-, Wissenschafts- & Technikgeschichte  
Fachgebiet Technikgeschichte  
Technische Universität Berlin  
Straße des 17. Juni 135  
10623 Berlin

Contact Email:

[fabian.zimmer@tu-berlin.de](mailto:fabian.zimmer@tu-berlin.de)

URL:

[https://www.technikgeschichte.tu-berlin.de/menue/personen/dr\\_fabian\\_zimmer/](https://www.technikgeschichte.tu-berlin.de/menue/personen/dr_fabian_zimmer/)