

ADVANCED, UNCONVENTIONAL, AND “BLUE SKY”

TECHNOLOGIES AND SYSTEMS

Open Session Proposal

Society for the History of Technology

New Orleans, LA. November 18-21, 2021

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History is replete with failed attempts to develop and commercialize advanced, unconventional, “blue sky,” and/or futuristic technologies and systems. This is particularly the case in transportation, which has witnessed, for example, high speed tube transport system proposals ranging from Medhurst’s 1799 “atmospheric railway” to Elon Musk’s 21st Century “hyperloop.” Analogous examples can be found in non-transport sectors and areas, from medicine and agriculture to communications and aerospace. This session will explore and clarify the historical forces and circumstances, and organizations and interests, among other factors, that influence government support for unconventional technologies. “Unconventional” is intended to include both specific technologies, such as tube transport, and “blue sky” basic research, such as superconducting magnetism. The Organizer’s paper will focus on unconventional transport systems from the U.S. in the 1960’s and 70’s, but papers dealing with other fields, areas, and countries are welcomed, particularly since the comparisons that emerge should be very enlightening.

Some questions that presenters might address include, but are not limited to the following: first, have unconventional technologies and systems developed differently in the U.S., compared to other countries, and if so, how and why? Second, how has federal policy affected R&D into unconventional technology and systems? Third, how has Department of Defense and military services’ support affected R&D for unconventional technology and systems? Papers may be built around case studies and/or more general histories. While the session is initially framed to focus on the role of government in the R&D process, other emphases could also be relevant. Comparative and/or transnational research would be particularly helpful in elucidating the subject matter.

Procedure: Those interested in proposing presentations for this session should send a one-page abstract (500 words maximum); a one-page short CV (300 words maximum); and current contact information. Send to Jim Cohen, Session Organizer: jcohen@jjay.cuny.edu Deadline to send this material is April 7, 2021.

First-time SHOT presenters who do not hold a tenure-track position and received their PhD in last two years, may wish to be considered for the Robinson Prize. Please indicate this in your abstract. Information about the Robinson Prize can be found on the SHOT website.