

IEEE ComSoc CQR Workshop 2020
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Welcome to the 34th Annual IEEE ComSoc International Communications Quality and Reliability Workshop. For 34 years, industry experts have gathered at this workshop to discuss network communications quality, reliability, and security issues, and how they relate to the real world issues our users face every day. It is a testament to the hard work, industriousness, and creativity of the people who have preceded us in this workshop and vision -- and the leadership of Dr. Vincent Chan -- that we are holding this workshop virtually, in the midst of a global pandemic that has touched all of us to one degree or another.

This year's workshop will be a celebration of the achievements of Black Americans delivering excellence in network communications and advanced digital technologies. The IEEE and the sponsors of this year's workshop have dedicated this opening session to feature the achievements of highly successful individuals -- your colleagues and friends -- who live at the intersection of "race" -- or, more precisely, the "racial identity" of Black Americans -- and the development and delivery of technology products and services ranging from artificial intelligence, Internet of Things, and voice recognition software, to 5G, network virtualization, and software defined networks.

These individuals have driven and achieved the highest levels of service excellent while being Black in America.

So today's workshop is going to cover many of the same topics as past workshops, but we're going to reframe the context. Specifically, we're going to connect the technologies of networks -- the hardware, the software, and everything in between -- to the real world, real companies, and real issues faced by real people -- Black Americans (or Blacks in America).

And of course, we are having this conversation against the backdrop of significant events affecting Black Americans. The COVID-19 pandemic is having a disproportionately harsh effect on the Black community. For example, studies published by the CDC and others consistently show that people of color are dying at a higher rate than their white counterparts. The reasons for this disparity have significantly more to do with social and economic issues than physiological ones.

Meanwhile, Blacks in America are having a conversation with the broader society and with government about the delivery of and access to basic essentials -- from healthcare and education, to economic opportunity, justice, and democracy. As we'll discuss on this and other panels today, access to technology is an important part of that conversation -- because the lack of it is part of the problem, and increasing access to it is a critical part of the solution.

Technology has an important role to play in ameliorating or disrupting the various forces that “divide” Black America from the rest of America.

By having that conversation today, we hope to create awareness among our ICT-sector peers about the contributions being made by Black Americans to this industry. Perhaps most ambitiously, we want to inspire the next generation of Black Americans. This industry can only work for Black Americans when more Black Americans work for the industry – as business managers and executives, technologists, innovators, and yes, even lawyers.

So today we want to talk about three things:

- (1) The making of Black identity.
- (2) The power of technology – and particularly network technologies.
- (3) And the role of technology as an enabler of progress for the Black experience in America.

And we are very lucky to have three outstanding leaders in this industry – from Ericsson, Comcast, and VMware – as part of IEEE’s first all-Black panel to help shape this conversation.

Before we start, though, a quick comment about technology.

We know technology can be the ultimate enabler. Its capacity for facilitating change cuts across all the critical verticals – healthcare, education, economic opportunity, justice, and democracy – and gives Black Americans greater access to each. For example:

- (1) A Johns Hopkins study found that technology could be used to knock down cultural- and gender-specific barriers to hypertension self-management by developing culturally-tailored content for a home-based telecare program aimed at improving hypertension care in Black Americans.
- (2) Access to technology – including broadband and other network technologies – improves educational and economic outcomes for everybody, including communities of color.
- (3) Technology can improve outcomes in our justice system, such as by giving individuals access to more information about the law and other resources (including by connecting them to people who are willing and able to help).
- (4) Technology increases access to voting and other critical government services.

But we also know that technology can be a double-edged sword, particularly when it comes to identity – in our case, racial identity. Technology can be used to construct and celebrate identity, or to deconstruct and denigrate identity.

This dual nature of technology is part of what’s feeding the raging debate today about privacy and the need to federal legislation to impose limits on the use of arguably sensitive information and technologies, like facial recognition technologies, precise geolocation information, and information about children under age 13.

As a communications lawyer in Washington, DC, I see that the way we often try to deal with this issue is to talk about technology from the perspective of it being “neutral.” We use terms like technology neutrality, technology or network agnostic, net neutrality, algorithmic fairness, transparency. We speak in these terms because it is very appealing to think of something like our networks or our computers as being free of bias or prejudice; free of regulation that inhibits innovation or plays favorites; free so everyone can use it and shape it and make that technology his or her own.

But there are aspects of technology that are not – and really should not be – free of identity. Technologies are designed, built, and deployed by humans, and reflect their biases and prejudices, good and bad. And identity has always mattered in the United States – it was baked into our founding documents, it was the defining legal construct of the post-Civil War South, and continues to crop up in ways both explicit and implicit. Identity – both real and perceived – has contributed greatly to our current state of affairs.

As a consequence, identity is an essential consideration for us. Accepting identity as a consideration in the development and deployment of technology frees us from a fundamental problem with “neutrality” – that is, from equating equality with equity. And perhaps, through the proper use of identity, we can achieve and benefit from the fullest potential of technology as the great enabler of human and technological development.