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Comments on

”Data Flows at Risk: The  
Goeconomics of Global  
Telecom Networks, 1850-2025”

by Porcellacchia, Trebesch and  
Wache

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# Paper summary

- Global telecom network absolutely vital for the dissemination of information
- This paper:
  - Compile massive new dataset (*CableHist*) covering the global network of telegraph, telephone and internet cables as well as satellites 1850-2025
  - Estimate countries' **dependence on foreign cables** and **exposure to disruptions** using a network traffic model

# Main findings

- Hegemonic powers have dominated and weaponised control over telecom networks
- Geopolitical tensions create a desire for independence and spur strategic investments
- The current system is vulnerable with pronounced risks in the East China Sea, the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean

# Overall assessment

- Fascinating and important paper
- Well written, analysis carefully crafted
- The authors provide a public good: impressive dataset that will be made available to others

# Comment I: The mind-boggling importance of the telecom network

- Will have no problem selling the paper
- But would still be helpful to think about the ways in which the global economy is dependent on information
- Useful exercise: what would happen if the telecom network was shut down?

## Comment II: What about terrestrial networks?

- Key objective of the paper: identify vulnerabilities
- The role of terrestrial networks only discussed briefly in the paper, could elaborate.
- Could we infer something about their importance by systematically comparing landlocked countries and islands?

## Comment III: Causality

- Could use exogenous shocks to identify the impact of geopolitical tensions on strategic investments
- Could study the impact of severed links on the flow of information.
  - Anecdotal evidence provided in the paper. How common are such disruptions in the data?
  - Can disruptions be linked to key outcomes? Use trade as a proxy for flows, but perhaps data on actual information flows can be used for a sub-sample?

# Comment IV: Quantifying political links using the *CableHist* dataset

- Could use the *CableHist* data to quantify political links
- Akerman and Seim (2014): the global arms trade network. Are countries more prone to trade arms with countries in their political vicinity?
- Could set up a model inspired by the gravity trade literature and model the probability of investing in a cable/corridor as a function of distance, contiguity, common history, similar polity etc.
- Could benchmark against votes in the UN security council

## Comment V: Any surprises?

- Main results reported the paper in line with what we would expect
- Did you find anything surprising?