

Bio: “Tim Unwin (born 1955) is a British academic and public figure, specialising in the uses of digital technology by the world’s poorest and most marginalised peoples.  Trained as a geographer, he transgresses boundaries between disciplines and sectors, as well as in the importance of international understanding between peoples and governments.  He served as Secretary General of the Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation between 2011 and 2015, and since then has held roles advising governments and organisations on the uses of digital technologies in “development”.  He has written or edited 17 books and has more than 250 other publications to his name.  In recognition of his services to the Commonwealth he was appointed a Companion of the Most Distinguished Order of St. Michael and St George in the Queen’s Birthday Honours, 2016”

Short abstract: “This address seeks to challenge some of our often taken-for-granted assumptions about the use of digital technologies and their positive influences on climate change by situating this interface within a more holistic framing that sees climate change as but a part of the wider environmental impacts of digital transformation.  It begins with a short critique of the notion of sustainable development that underlies so many of the UN’s current policies and initiatives, and asks whether the notions of “sustainability” and “development” are as neatly compatible as so many organisations and individuals believe.  It then explores some of the reasons why the real drivers of higher carbon emissions and wider environmental harms (the twin growth mantras of economic growth and demographic growth), especially when combined with the “digital innovation fetish”, are so often glorified, before providing an alternative perspective on how we understand the environmental impacts of “digital transformation”.  These arguments are then exemplified through an analysis of the unsustainable business models of many tech companies, the environmental impact on “outer” space of the use of digital tech, and a consideration of the implications of digital tech on our lived experiences of nature.”