In 1967, power system operators in the Midwestern United States completed ties between the eastern and western interconnected systems to create the largest machine in the world. Known as “the grid,” this project linked North Americans from the Atlantic to the Pacific coasts, and from Canada to Mexico—except for Texans—into a single network of synchronized electricity generators, transmission lines, and distribution systems. A kilowatt of electricity generated in New York could, in fact, travel all the way to San Francisco. While operators abandoned those alternating current ties in 1975 and later installed direct current ties between east and west, the vast majority of North Americans are still connected to each other through our electric power systems.

Julie Cohn’s book, The Grid: Biography of an American Technology, traces the development of this network from the earliest links between independent power companies in the late nineteenth century to the maturity of the grid in the late twentieth century. This history has implications for policies regarding the type, location, scale, and operation of energy resources used for electrification, and the degree to which power users will be connected or isolated going forward. In this presentation, Cohn will address the technical and organizational challenges of building the grid, the “gaggle” of power companies, politicians, and regulators who variously pushed for or resisted building interconnected systems, and the fraternity of experts who collaborated to make it happen. She will also answer the intriguing question of why Texas has almost always had a separate grid!

Julie Cohn is a research historian at the Center for Public History at the University of Houston. Current projects include an examination of the history of electrification in Texas, collaboration with a team of twenty scholars collecting oral histories around Hurricane Harvey, and coordination of the CPH Research Colloquium.