



School of Public Policy

Internet Governance Project

## **(Re)Defining the field:**

### **From Internet Governance to Digital Political Economy**

*A Panel Discussion held in The Hague, October 17, 2022 at the Internet Governance Project's 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference*

#### **Tatiana Tropina:**

My name is Tatiana Tropina, and I am an Assistant Professor of Security Governance at Leiden University. This first panel will discuss the reframing already mentioned by Alisa Heaver. To discuss this issue, we have a stellar panel. We have Milton Mueller who organized this conference, a professor at Georgia Tech who traveled from Atlanta to be here. We have Jan Aart Scholte, a colleague of mine who is joining us online from Leiden University. We have Louise Marie Hurel from the London School of Economics and we have Michel Van Eeten from the Technology University of Delft.

I would like to start this discussion by asking Milton, what's wrong with "Internet Governance," why do we have to reframe?

#### **Milton Mueller:**

Good question. And indeed, I am the instigator of this proposed reframing even though I have deep roots in the original Internet governance community.

Between 1996 and 2006, IG became an established term. It was a label for both the field of study and an arena of political and policy contention. The Internet rose to the foreground of this community for a good reason. It created a protocol that allowed computers and software to be globally interoperable. This was a profound technological disruption in the status quo. It created all kinds of new and interesting governance problems related to communications, and the coordination of Internet identifiers. But now, because of the success of the Internet, the actual internetworking protocol is just one part of a broader digital ecosystem. In that ecosystem data networking relies on ubiquitous digital devices and operating system and application software. People use the internet to access algorithm-driven matching platforms and generate massive amounts of digital data. That entire ecosystem puts digital devices, networks and data at the center of social life.

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So, if you're interested in the public policy and governance implications of this ecosystem, we cannot isolate the Internet anymore. We have to look at the way internetworking fits into this broader digital ecosystem. I'm not challenging the multistakeholder governance mechanisms; on the contrary, I want to extend them. But we can't do that unless we're looking at the wider digital ecosystem.

I don't think most of us would have any trouble accepting the fact that the Internet is part of a broader digital ecosystem. There are 2 things, however, that are not recognized, and seem to be more difficult for scholars in the field to accept.

One, the digital ecosystem is a system of production and exchange. It's a large and growing sector of the economy. It is driven largely by market forces. Governance debates must take that economic dimension into account.

Second, we need to adjust our analytical framework. To apprehend the policy problems of the digital ecosystem, you need to have a digital political economy, an analytical framework that recognizes that markets and states act as distinct but interdependent elements of the social system. Political economy starts with the way digitization affects the economy, the industries formed around it, the livelihoods they provide. It recognizes that governance institutions evolve and change in response to changing relations of production and exchange, just as governance and politics affect markets and production. From this perspective, any proposal to shape the digital economy through public policy is based on a theory, implicit or explicit, of political economy.

This is clear from the issues currently shaping the digital world. Let's take, for example, export controls on chips. The U.S. has chosen to respond to the rise of China by weaponizing its lead in semiconductor technology. Semiconductors of course are at the core of not only the Internet, but the entire digital ecosystem. This will have a major impact on devices, software, and even on education and research in electrical engineering, computer science, AI and online services. Whatever you think of these chip policies, does it make sense to call them Internet governance, or does it make more sense to see them as clashing strategies of states regarding the digital political economy?

Take another major issue: digital sovereignty. In the name of digital sovereignty, governments are restricting transnational data flows and blocking access to apps owned by foreign companies. Now is this Internet governance? Sure, it is. But it is also data governance, cybersecurity governance, trade protectionism in services. The only label that captures all of that, to my mind, is digital political economy. Then when you get to things like digital money or cryptocurrencies, these are dependent upon Internet connectivity, but they are also affecting areas of policy like money and credit that are new and are not really captured by Internet governance.

To sum up, I am promoting digital political economy for three reasons: first, because it locates Internet in a broader digital ecosystem; second, because it clarifies how and why Internet governance issues get wrapped up in geopolitical and trade rivalries in the international system; third, it highlights the way states and markets interact both domestically and internationally.

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### **Tatiana Tropina:**

Thank you very much. Milton, your statement is that the digital political economy is the only label to capture this expanding policy field and field of inquiry. So, I would like to ask our panelists. First, do you think, based on what Milton said and what you know, is this reframing necessary? If yes, is the digital political economy the term that is going to capture all this, and if not, why not? I would like to start with Jan Aart.

### **Jan Aart Scholte:**

Thank you so much. A very good and important provocation from Milton; and I totally agree that the subject of Internet governance, as studied generally at the moment, is too narrow. So, I'm gonna go with that. I think I'm going to question whether we want to broaden the exercise substantively to cover many more issues besides the Internet per se. But I am going to say yes, absolutely, let's go for a wider array of approaches to analyzing Internet Governance, though political economy is perhaps only one of the ways to go. So the overall response to this provocation is to say, let's not expand the field substantively too much. But let's expand the field theoretically and in terms of the analysis that's undertaken.

Milton is totally right that there's a lot more going on in the digital world than the Internet. We have blockchain, we have the hardware, we have robotics, we have AI, we have platforms, and there are many, many other things happening in the digital aspect of contemporary society. On the other hand, the Internet per se is very important. It connects 5.5 billion people for an average of 6 h and 49 min per day. That adds up to 1.4 billion years of human activity and human consciousness per year. That's a lot of stuff to be governing, and that's a really big subject. And we need people who specialize in Internet governance. So I would be worried if those people who have rightly invested massive efforts into understanding Internet governance would now suddenly go and spend a lot of time on AI and robotics and platforms and blockchain and all kinds of other stuff where in fact, we already have other specialists. People are working in those areas, and they're way ahead of us, and they are publishing books and articles, and so on and don't necessarily need us. But they, those others don't know about Internet governance in the way that the people collected in this project and conference do. Let's note the value-added that our community of researchers has. That would be my view, on that front. Of course, we should think about how the Internet relates to the wider digital world. So we shouldn't be so narrow as if the Internet is all by itself. But that's different from switching the focus to those other topics. So that's on the substantive side.

On the theoretical side, I do think that indeed, Internet Governance as it has been studied has had a very strong institutional bias. In other words, it's been very focused on how the organizational structures and procedures work in Internet governance. And that's fine, and that's important but then it's very much a focus on how actors negotiate and find their way through the institutional apparatus. But Internet governance is a lot more than institutional apparatuses. Internet Governance is also a field of culture. It's also a field of political economy, as Milton has stressed. It's also a field of history, it's a field of geography there's a lot more going on than simply the institutional processes. So by all means, let's expand what we understand by governance. But I don't think we should expand ourselves too much beyond the Internet focus per se.

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Political economy? Absolutely important. Two thoughts there though. One is that there is not just one political economy. There are many political economies. Are we looking at a kind of power politics, realist political economy? Or are we looking more at liberal political economy? Are we looking at a more Gramscian political economy, Marxist ideas about capitalism and the commodification of the Internet sphere. There are lots of different political economies that we might take, so saying that we're going to do political Economy is only one step in the direction that there are many more things that we could do. And then again, my concern is that in political economy, Economy is the noun. It can become materialist. It can become economic to the neglect of other dimensions, such as geography, culture, ideational aspects, historical aspects, and so on. So again, Political Economy is one of the ways to open things up, but not the only way.

### **Tatiana Tropina:**

Thank you very much Jan Art. So, opening up the analysis or opening up the field of analysis. Reframe Internet or reframe governance or reframe both. Louise, I would like to go to you: is this reframing necessary? If yes, in what sense; if no, why?

### **Louise Marie Hurel:**

Thanks, Tatiana, and thanks Milton for the provocation. I think it's important first to distinguish two elements that I identify from Milton's intervention. There is digital political economy as a lens or a theory, and in that sense, it highlights problems and questions that we need to ask. And there's the other part, which is almost like a political project, a normative commitment to change the way we see governance. It's important to distinguish between these two dimensions.

If we're talking about the lens, Jan mentioned that political economy involves multiple ways of seeing. If you're looking at it through a dependency or Marxian perspective, the questions are intimately linked to inequalities. We're looking at and questioning the distribution of resources. For developing countries, inequality is at the core of the issues they are raising at the IGF and other Internet governance spaces. It's normally those kinds of questions that are somehow linked to this lens of what's the inequality over here in the room and how can we make this a little bit less about the different power polls. So as a lens, you know this is not the only lens, and this, as I said, it's only one fraction of what we could think about in terms of political economy.

If we approach Internet governance from, let's say, a more feminist perspective, or from a Science & Technology Studies (STS) perspective or from a decolonial perspective, we're going to ask many different questions. At the end of the day, it's thinking about power and where power lies, and how it's distributed beyond necessarily focusing on just the economic side of it. But still it's going back to that notion of the markets and the resources and the distribution of those resources. If we're using, for example, an STS perspective and look at the Internet governance field, we might be looking at how technology is distributed across different regions. We might ask questions about how the design of technologies has political implications, or about how particular protocols have specific political implications. If we think about the disputes, not only between countries, but also the mundane negotiations of the people in the room, the engineers. So I think you know these are the questions that, for example, the STS lens

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would bring. But it would also bring the question about the maintainers. Those that are actually making the Internet function which you're not necessarily thinking about the political, economy, that's in the background, for sure. So that is complementary. But you're losing some other dimensions if you, if you restrict that to the political economy. You could always argue the market is always there, the interests are always there. The resources are always there, of course, but the focus is being shifted. So if we're talking about a decolonial critique, we're talking about the history, like the historical roots of how let's say like data colonialism, which is an emerging term, about how data has become embedded in our lives, and it's a requirement for us to actually trade our data with these companies. And there's like new historicities to how we think about the power distribution and the inequalities that we are subjected to just by being in an interconnected society. So the decolonial critique is also a way of investigating where are these companies based and how are they propagating new ways of colonization? And I don't think again that's necessarily excluding the political economy. But it's bringing in other elements to it.

From a feminist perspective, we can ask about apps and their implications for gendering or targeting women. That question is not focusing necessarily on the political economy, though it's embedded in it. But it's still a question that is directed towards particular social implications. If we focus on political economy as this overarching thing, we lose some of the questions we can ask, questions that are quite important for power in our digital society.

And the second element, the political project proposing to shift the way we see and how we build Internet governance. Coming from a cybersecurity perspective, the digital political economy element elucidates important things in cybersecurity. Such as, where are these companies doing threat intel and what are they focusing on? Why are these companies focusing on particular threat actors like the big power players. and not necessarily producing data that's focusing on countries in the global South? So that is an important element or lens to put on when you're thinking about cybersecurity. But, on the other hand, when we're looking at the broader intersections between cybersecurity governance and Internet governance, I don't see how the digital political economy lens adds anything to discussions about the United Nations Group of Governmental Experts. It restricts what we can say and what we can analyze in the UNGGE negotiations.

Finally, I just want to ask: what are the potential consequences of proposing that reframing? Because if we do say Yes, let's do digital political economy, what does it mean for the UN Internet Governance Forum (IGF), which is struggling to keep its relevance amidst all these other spaces that are highly specialized? By focusing on the digital political economy aspects, would we be weakening the identity of this community? Could it be strengthened by returning to Internet governance and saying, Let's stick to that. Let's foster this community. Let's continue because it's already consolidated in terms of the concept. Why shift, then? Because as a political project, that would have political implications and possibly pose risks. Will it strengthen the institutions right now or would it actually weaken them?

### **Tatiana Tropina:**

Thank you very much, Louise, and before I go to Michel I want to say that I haven't heard a hard no. I've heard that reframing is necessary, but very cautious attitude especially from Louise, and

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if I may join your comments with my own comments, are we really broadening the field of inquiry, or are we losing important dimensions? Is political economy all-encompassing? And before we go to that question, I'm sure that after Michel's intervention we will have more. So, Michel yes or no. If no, why; if yes, what are your concerns? Please.

### **Michel Van Eeten:**

Thank you. Is reframing necessary? I would say No, it's not *necessary*. I should caveat that I don't consider myself a part of the IG community. I participate in some of the events. I'm somewhat aware of the research that goes on in that field. But if I look at how that community is functioning, I will say there are certain benefits to sticking with the old framing. That framing is institutionalized, right? We had an opening from a representative of the Dutch government that tells you what the advantages are. That framing has been made part of the institutional categories that governments support. That's important. It means you are recognizable as a partner to discuss issues in that space, and (not to put too fine a point on it) it has implications for funding. So, I could see why some people would then choose to stick with the existing framing. You have carved out a niche together, and that seems to work.

Of course, the main risk of doing that is that you're going to become irrelevant at some point academically. I've always been struck by the total misnomer that Internet governance is for this community. There is this Dutch expression "you're wearing pants that are too big for you," and that fits what was going on in the field of Internet governance very well, because it was never Internet governance to begin with. If you're very generous, you could have said it was "identifier governance," which is a tiny fraction of what comprises the Internet. So that never really made any sense to me. But it was also not even governance. Even if you focus on the identifiers at these events, people were talking about things like security, sovereignty, access, platforms. That's not identifiers. And those communities, including the governmental institutions that focus on Internet governance, they have nothing to say in that space. So you had a name that implied that your pants are size XXL but they were really a S.

The fact that somebody discusses those broader themes at, say, IGF doesn't make it governance. It just means it's a conference and people are talking. So then the question is, are you improving this by reframing it as digital political economy. I think, to some extent. Yes. Because at least there's a better fit between the theories that you can draw on, and the actual processes that you want to study. In the existing field, what people have been studying, mostly, as far as I can tell, are a handful of formal institutions, and for that you have International Relations and those fields. You have some nice approaches that fit as long as your main point of interest is formal institutions, but not if it's the actual governance taking place. In the real world most of these formal institutions are marginal. In that sense you give yourself a better theoretical basis if you move to political economy. The downside of that is that the community could be cancelling itself. This is not based on a very deep understanding, but my intuition is that the digital political economy space currently doesn't really exist. It's a fragmented set of conversations in different disciplines. If this community would say, we want to provide that space where all of this is brought together, then in a way that could be very powerful.

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### Tatiana Tropina:

Thank you very much, Michel. I like how you start with No. And then the No became Yes. It also brought me back to Alisa's intervention, to this entire idea of evolution and use of Internet governance. So, I would say that would be interesting to hear from you all. Do you think that IG pants will always be XXL size on a small person? in a nutshell, do you have something to answer to all the panelists one by one or all of them?

### Milton Mueller:

To my mind the most negative reaction to what I'm proposing came from Louise, and I think some of it was valid and some of it was not. I'll start with what I think is not a serious argument. That is: you're losing decolonialism, and you're losing this perspective of developing countries, and equality and all of that. You know, colonialism is a fundamentally a political economy concept. I'm amazed at how the academic community in communications, which is not steeped in political economy, distorts and misuses this concept of digital colonialism in ways that lead nowhere.

If you want to know what colonialism looks like, take a look at what has happened to Hong Kong in the last five years. You have a former colony that was transferred to an external government that has fundamentally taken over its internal institutions. It completely suppresses freedom of expression, speaks a different language. So it's just a new colonial master. You think they're all Chinese? No, they're Cantonese in Hong Kong, and there's people in the mainland who do not understand Cantonese. You want to talk about power relations? How about a country coming in and just dominating the local government of another country. That is colonialism. Colonialism is not someone in a foreign country using Google's search engine on their own accord. That's absurd. If you really want to talk about colonialism, about imperialism, you had better be talking political economy. You'd better have a theory of the State, how states expand or extend their power or contract their power, how economic relationships are contributing to or undermining that power.

I think the most important argument Louise made, and Michelle really picked up on it, is this idea of weakening the identity of the community. It's true, it is a problem. You don't need to tell me this, because we are the Internet Governance Project. We have *internetgovernance.org* as our domain name. We have established an identity of studying and talking about Internet governance for 15 years. But I just can't get around the fact that this change is necessary. We are no longer talking about IG per se, we need to be talking about the digital ecosystem and the political economy of it.

I do think Michel overstates how big the pants were and how small traditional IG issues were. In addition to economically critical things like global compatibility, they were about trademarks and deception, who gets a country code, the role of the DNS in cybersecurity; so, sovereignty and security issues really are implicit there. They're about national governments losing control over the governance of a global infrastructure to a global multistakeholder community. And it is about new institutions – ICANN, the RIRs, the NOGs – these are not irrelevant to governance. They're very important pillars of how digital governance takes place. So, I think that we do have to look at them in this broader framework of digital political economy, but I wouldn't ridicule the

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established community. I think we can make that transition by simply looking more profoundly at the kinds of issues raised by what we used to call IG and realizing how pervasive it is and how radical it is.

### **Tatiana Tropina:**

Thank you, Milton, but before I go to anybody else, I insist that there is one question that you did not answer, and I think that was a good question. By reframing, you might lose some dimensions, have you reflected on that, and are you ready to lose them? You reflected on the issue of colonialism and said it is covered by some others which Louise mentioned. Sorry for insisting that you answer this question, but I think it is important, because if we're having this debate, we might as well reflect on it.

### **Milton Mueller:**

I think we *would* lose some things, things that I would like to see lost.

### **Louise Marie Hurel:**

My actual argument was not just data colonialism but much broader. I think there needs to be a clear distinction between the lens of digital political economy and the political project, because there are different consequences to each of them. On the lens side I think there is a restriction. If you always go back to Oh, this is about markets, states and society you are going to lose some questions that you can ask and there are communities that asked these questions. So, on the , you can say, data colonialism is inherently a political economy issue, of course you can argue that because it is in part, and I never said that there is a clear separation, these are lenses. But there are dimensions that you cannot grasp. So, think about data colonialism. When I say this it does not mean big tech companies are taking over everything. Of course we don't have a choice sometimes, and these companies do have a huge power but at the end of the day think about the consequences as to particular communities, because they just need to be part of all of that and they cannot ask the questions, because inherently, they're part of the digital political economy, and there are questions about power, about gender, about race, and we're all like white here sitting here and talking about data colonialism. Right? I think there's something to be said about that, about the people who are asking questions. And if you're necessarily putting digital political economy above all that as the origin of everything, I think there's something missing there. And if so, if it is a political project, I think Michel's point of Let's then do something and have space so we can dive deep into these particular questions on digital political economy. Great, but if we're thinking that as framing for how we approach this evolving landscape, then I think there are lots of discussions that are already happening that we are gonna miss out on. So that's basically my take.

### **Tatiana Tropina:**

Thank you, Louise. I want to give the floor to Jan Art because he was also approaching it from the dimension's perspectives. He didn't call it lenses, but there was something about dimension. Jan, would you like to comment?



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### Jan Art Scholte:

Sure, lots of good comments coming out here, and again my main concern is not that Internet governance hasn't expanded its substantive area. Michel was talking about the identifiers. Clearly the work has gone well beyond the identifiers, it's looking at data, it's looking at content, it's looking at the various so-called layers of the Internet. I'm just saying on the substantive expansion, don't expand it beyond that. Keep to the Internet part of it, relate it to the wider issues, but not more. To me, the expansion really needs to happen by engaging with wider governance research. There's all this stuff that Louise mentioned. There's all this stuff going on in understanding governing now and there tends to be in some at in some quarters of the Internet governance arena that tends to be a kind of parochialism where there's a lot of talk amongst one another but not talking with the wider governance work.

On the point of colonialism, I think that it is more than political economy. I was struck by the way Milton used language, and the dominance of language, as an example. It actually shows some of the cultural and knowledge dimensions of colonialism that is not reducible to political economy. In general, colonialism is also about law and accounts of history, who's left in and left out of history, and what kind of counts of history are made. It's about statistics, and how data is formed, and the like. It's about how general knowledge forms, what counts as knowledge, what counts as science, what counts as truth, and there are hierarchies of knowledge, hierarchies of culture, hierarchies of language, and all of these are extremely important and not reducible to capitalism, or to state-market relations. They are involved with them, they are partly shaped by those material conditions, but they are not reducible to them. That is where I think political economy can become overly narrow.

### Milton Mueller:

I just don't think that you miss these things by focusing on political economy. It's not like I'm saying nobody should do anything else. So, if you want to be an STS person and study social constructions of technology in a cultural sense, that's fine. But that's probably not going to lead you into the contemporary policy debates in governance institutions as they make decisions. That is going to be somewhat more detached academic research that maybe illuminates things but is not directly and immediately relevant to policy.

I don't agree with Jan that language and culture are outside the political economy framework. If you look at Susan Strange's work, she creates this 4-sided pyramid composed of production, finance, power/security and the fourth part of this pyramid is, essentially, the intellectual aspects and culture. What people believe, what they think, how they communicate, fits nicely into the framework because you cannot explain political economy change without taking those things into account. If you're talking about language, for example, you might want to look at the way the Cantonese language is being suppressed by the mainland's control of the education system or by their by their control of the media in China. The Chinese version of TikTok just eliminated a very popular Cantonese-language influencer because they said his speech was "incomprehensible." One could also mention the standardization of language by nationalist movements in many other countries. So certainly, culture and language can be put into a political economy framework, and I'm just not convinced that we are losing anything by having

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this framework. I do see that the existing Internet governance community has very little to say about many of these things. As Michel indicated, they cover a very narrow range of issues. So it is not quite fair to say I'm the one narrowing things down. I am trying to expand the framework and the focus. But I am trying to give it a direction which I think really bears directly on how policy takes place, how governance, how these power relations are negotiated. I do not want to be a detached academic describing things. It is precisely the governance angle that necessitates the political economy framework.

### **Tatiana Tropina:**

So, it is not the internet itself that is broadening as a concept and includes much more than just the internet, but more on the governance side. Why am I asking this? Because when I'm listening to you, when I'm listening to other panelists, it feels like we need some sort of Venn diagram. When you say that language and culture is a part of political economy, of course they might, but what part of this concept of this field of inquiry is not included? And I think that this is where the clash at this panel happens. Because you might see some things as a part of this field of inquiry but other think that they're broader. I think it would be very helpful to have this. I would like to turn to Michel, because I feel like he might have something to say about all this.

### **Michel Van Eeten:**

I would just repeat some of the points already made. I think the shift would lose some things, and Milton did allude to things that he would like to get lost along the way, though I am not sure yet what those things are. You can only get coherence in a field of research if you also leave certain things out, but that part is still a bit unclear. On the other hand, I think Milton made a compelling point that the field itself had already left many things out. In that sense you have to wonder if what is being left out is relevant to the choice of whether you should shift the framing. But it would be enlightening, at least, to hear some of the things that wouldn't be picked up in that new frame

### **Milton Mueller:**

One of the things that I think is an example of how the absence of the political economy perspective distorts the Internet Governance dialogue is this whole business of values and standards. There was a big movement among Internet governance people around the idea that you can put human rights into technical standards. And to me this was just showing that scientifically they are unaware of the political-economic embeddedness of technical standards. They are thinking that if an IETF committee puts a certain architecture into a standard that it automatically guarantees that human rights will be respected. And I'm like [facepalm]. But people in the IG domain didn't want to hear that argument, and in order to make that argument I found myself having to appeal to political economy. I had to say, look, who are the players who are helping to make this standard, how are states and regulators reacting to it, who are the economic interests that are affected, who adopts this standard, how is it implemented?

### **Michel Van Eeten**

Yeah, that's the more obvious counterargument; 90% of all standards never get adopted, and there is a reason for that.

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### Jan Art Scholte:

I think it's quite right that there's a large literature on political economy of digital communications, but there hasn't been a political economy of Internet governance, more specifically as such. And I think Milton's call for that is important and should be looked at and developed. Again, with the others, I would say, expand Internet governance discussion beyond the identifiers so that it also looks at content and data issues, but I don't think we should take the extra step to AI and robotics and everything else that goes beyond the Internet as a network.

Again, Milton I just would caution about becoming too materialist in the political economy. You're entirely right, Susan Strange looks at knowledge as one of the 4 pillars. And yes, indeed, political economy looks at a lot of ideational and cultural elements, but it always relates it to the economy. It always takes it back to the material conditions. And the argument here is that these cultural conditions, also have a relative autonomy, a relative autonomy. They're also worth looking at in their own rights. And if you go to the Internet governance sphere, it's quite practical. If you don't speak English, if you don't have the technical rationality, if you don't know the jargon, if you don't know the dress codes, if you don't know the sense of humor, you will not have power, that's a very fundamental condition of Internet governance. When, we, and I'm looking at us around the table here, who are the English speakers, who do have the technical rationality, who do have the jargon, we are not conscious of just how powerful we are because of that, and so we tend not to look at ourselves so much because we miss that. And there, I think again I will always remember going to the IETF and having a brilliant newcomer from India with a particular RFC that he wanted to do. He was completely overwhelmed because he didn't have the language. Didn't have the rituals, and all the rest of it, and his particular proposal was excluded, not because of political economy but because of culture.

### Milton Mueller:

The point that Jan Aart made is really important, but I don't think it challenges or contradicts the proposal that I'm trying to make. If you're analyzing how power is affected by culture, you do have to relate it to the material basis of society. Maybe I am a historical materialist, although I'm not a Marxist. For example, the guy had to take an airplane to IETF meeting. That's expensive. And the reason that you all have to speak English, and know the culture of the IETF and the ICANN crowd is because of the historical process through which the Internet developed, right? It started in the US among computer scientists, and they inherited these positions of management and control over critical Internet resources precisely because they were the ones who developed it. And they developed it in part because the US government funded their research and supported them economically, and – even more important – a growing, self-sustaining private industry developed around it. So that became a self-reinforcing cycle which developed wealth and reinforced their centrality. I think too much of the critiques of that “US/Western bias” from a non-political economy perspective unrealistically assumes that we can just somehow change our minds and eliminate that process and suddenly make everybody equal. To me that shows a complete detachment from the realities of governance and society. So, I think political economy reinforces our awareness of those kinds of issues, it doesn't obscure them.

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### **Tatiana Tropina:**

So what happens to the governance of unique identifiers, this is what Alisa Heaver [of the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate change] said in her opening statement.

### **Milton Mueller:**

I would relate to what Michel said. If you don't ground your understanding of this IG community in a deeper understanding of the political economy of the digital ecosystem, then you risk becoming isolated and irrelevant. By focusing on digital political economy, you are strengthening the basis for saying, why are these institutions doing CIR independent of government control? Why are they not part of the sovereign system? Why are they outside of it? How did they get that way? How can they stay that way? I really believe that I'm pushing in that direction with this initiative, and not away from it.

### **Tatiana Tropina:**

I think, just to close this panel, I think that sometimes we are still talking past each other in all of this. Sometimes it feels that we're talking about terminology or lens, and you're talking a concept and so on and so forth but thank you to everyone who's listening online. Thank you.