The Technology We Choose to Create: Human Rights Advocacy in the IETF

A story of protocols, politics & people

TODAY'S TALK

01 — HELLO WORLD

An anthropologist in the IETF?

02 — RESEARCH CONTEXT

Human rights advocates in the IETF?

03 — MY FINDINGS

How are protocols political?

04 — CONCLUSIONS & Q&A

Now what?

HELLO WORLD

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Re: [Last-Call] Last Call: BCP 83 PR-Action Against Dan Harkins, 10 oct 2022 ietf@ietf

Harkins is an outlier; he is not just an example of Corinne Cath-Speth's 'loud men talking loudly' in her 'IETF Culture Wars' piece i.e. taking confidently and passionately about the positions they understand and believe -- but Harkins is an out-and-out bully conducting ad-hominem attacks. His bullying behaviour goes back years, with years of attendant complaints to the IESG.

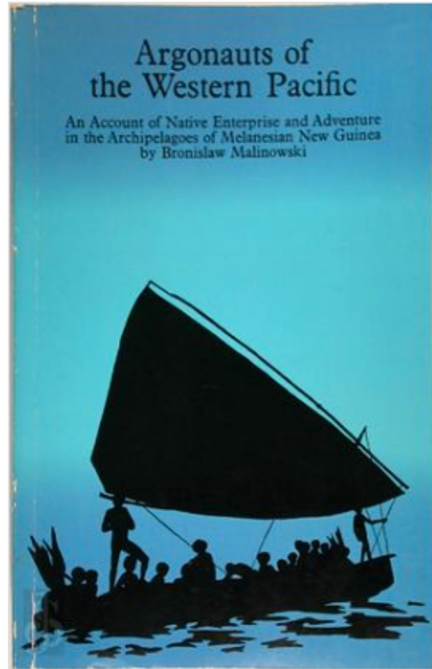https://hackcur.io/whats-wrong-with-loud-men-talking-loudly-the-ietfs-culture-wars/

Key Take-Away

We ~~Don't~~ Do Politics.

01

An IETF anthropologist

Am I lost?

ABOUT US

Anthropologists are everywhere, we study "up" (i.e. powerful people) and "at home" (i.e. our own societies.

What, How, Why of Anthropology

What?

Study of human cultures and social behavior

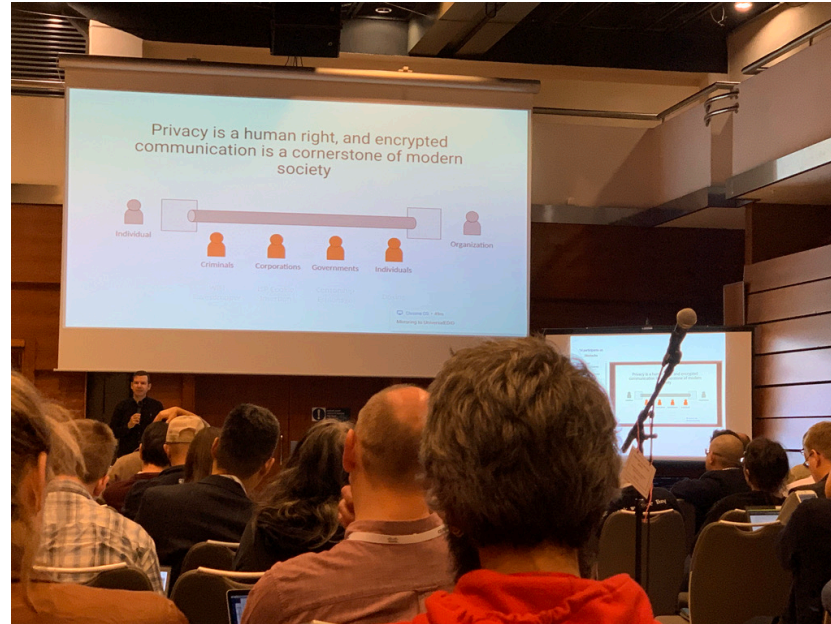## How?

Participant observation, interviews, fieldwork

Why?

How cultural conditions shape society

WHAT THEY SAY VS WHAT THEY MEAN:

The Technology We Choose to Create: Human Rights Advocacy in the IETF

TO ASK QUESTION LIKE

WHAT DO PEOPLE CARE ABOUT?

Freedom, autonomy, growth, choice

WHAT BELIEFS DO THEY HOLD?

Human rights advocates impose requirements that contravene IETF's beliefs about the nature of standards

HOW DO THESE BELIEFS INFORM CULTURAL PRACTICES?

They bolster resistance against human rights efforts

HOW DO COMMUNITIES FORM?

Long term participation, commercial interests, shared worldviews etc.

WHO IS EXCLUDED?

People who go against the IETF's cultural grain, like human rights advocates?

WHY DOES THIS KNOWLEDGE MATTER?

Provides cultural view on how standards happen

02 | Research Context

Human Rights advocates in the IETF & IRTF

Human Rights Protocol Considerations Group
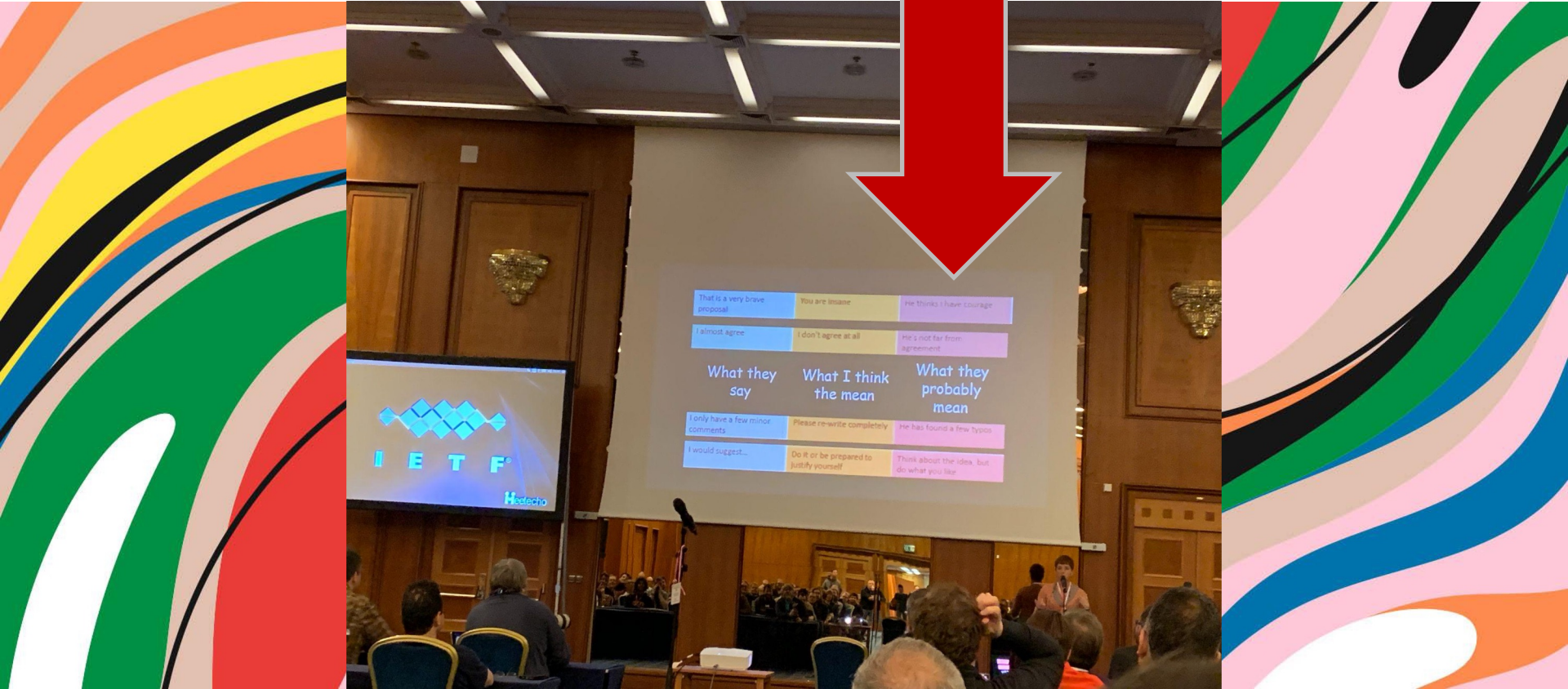
WHY DID THEY STRUGGLE?

03 | My Findings

Protocols as rooted in a culture that values individual freedom, voluntarist connection & choice

PROTOCOL NON-PRESCRIPTIVENESS

WHAT THEY SAY VS WHAT THEY MEAN:

ANALYSIS IN PAPER - KEY IETF VALUES

1°

CONNECTIVITY

Of machines, not humans, in laissez-faire manner

2°

PERMISSIONLESS INNOVATION

Rather than centralized, state governance

3°

OPENNESS

Freedom from coercion, including from human rights concerns

I am not convinced human rights fits in the IETF. I am willing to be told otherwise, but when we talk about the political world of human rights, what comes to my mind quickly is the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) or something like that, in which the question becomes, "Madame chairwoman, I would like to speak about the gentleman from 'Slowbovia,' who has just said something with which I disagree."

–INTERVIEWEE

"The problem is that it [human rights protocol guidelines] will be seen as didactic by the community that it is meant to influence. And far from achieving what it wants, there is a risk that it could backfire. It gives ammunition to the enemies of groups like the HRPC, at times."

–INTERVIEWEE

Clash of worldviews

SO WHAT?

04 | Conclusions & Q&A

Thank you!

https://corinnecath.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/CathCorinne-Thesis-DphilInformationCommunicationSocialSciences.pdf

Oxford Internet Institute | University of Oxford

Changing Minds and Machines:
A Case Study of Human Rights Advocacy in the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF)

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Hillary 2021