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An IETF with Much Diversity and Professional Conduct

Abstract

The process of producing today's Internet technologies through a culture of open participation and diverse collaboration has proved strikingly efficient and effective, and it is distinctive among standards organizations. During the early years of the IETF and its antecedent, participation was almost entirely composed of a small group of well-funded, American, white, male technicians, demonstrating a distinctive and challenging group dynamic, both in management and in personal interactions. In the case of the IETF, interaction style can often contain singularly aggressive behavior, often including singularly hostile tone and content. Groups with greater diversity make better decisions. Obtaining meaningful diversity requires more than generic good will and statements of principle. Many different behaviors can serve to reduce participant diversity or participation diversity. This document discusses IETF participation in terms of the nature of diversity and practical issues that can increase or decrease it. The document represents the authors' assessments and recommendations, following general discussions of the issues in the IETF.

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1. Introduction

This document discusses IETF participation, in terms of the nature of diversity and practical issues that can increase or decrease it. The topic has received recent discussion in the IETF, and the document represents the authors' assessments and recommendations about it, in the belief that it is constructive for the IETF and that it is consonant with at least some of the IETF community's participants.

The Internet Engineering Task Force [IETF] grew out of a research effort that was started in the late 1960s, with central funding by the US Department of Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA, later DARPA) employing a collection of research sites around the United States, and including some participation by groups of the US military. The community was originally restricted to participation by members of the funded research groups. In the 1980s, participation expanded to include projects funded by other agencies, most notably the US National Science Foundation for its NSFNet effort. At around the time the IETF was created in its current form, in the late 1980s, participation in the group became fully open, permitting attendance by anyone, independent of funding, affiliation, country of origin, or the like.

Beyond the obvious effects of the resulting technology that we now enjoy, the process of producing today's Internet technologies through a culture of open participation and diverse collaboration has proved strikingly efficient and effective, and it is distinctive among standards organizations. This culture has been sustained across many changes in participant origins, organizational structures, economic cycles, and formal processes. However, maintenance of the IETF's effectiveness requires constant vigilance. As new participants join the IETF mix, it is increasingly easy for the IETF's operation to gradually invoke models from other environments, which are more established and more familiar, but often are less effective.

Historically, participation in the IETF and its antecedent was almost entirely composed of a small group of well-funded, American, white, male technicians. No matter the intentions of the participants, such a narrow demographic demonstrated a distinctive group dynamic, both in management and in personal interactions, that persists into the current IETF. Aggressive and even hostile discussion behavior is quite common. In terms of management, the IETF can be significantly in-bred, favoring selection of those who are already well-known. Of course, the pool of candidates from which selections are made suffer classic limitations of diversity found in many engineering environments. Still, there is evidence and perception of selection bias, beyond this.

In the case of the IETF, the style of interaction can often demonstrate singularly aggressive behavior, including singularly hostile tone and content. In most professional venues, such behavior is deemed highly unprofessional, or worse. Within the IETF, such behavior has had long-standing tolerance. Criticizing someone's hostility is dismissed by saying that's just the way they are, or that someone else provoked it, or that the person is generally well-intentioned. Further, anyone expressing concern about the behavior is typically admonished to be less sensitive; that is, a recipient of an attack who then complains is often criticized or dismissed.

As the IETF opened its doors to participation by anyone, its demographics have predictably moved towards much greater variety. However, the group culture has not adapted to accommodate these changes. The aggressive debating style and the tolerance for personal attacks can be extremely off-putting for participants from more polite cultures. And, the management selection processes can tend to exclude some constituencies inappropriately.

Recently, members of an informal IETF women's interest group, called "syssters", organized a quiet experiment, putting forward a large number of women candidates for management positions, through the IETF's "NomCom" process. NomCom is itself a potentially diverse group of IETF participants, chosen at random from a pool of recent meeting attendees who offer their services. Hence, its problematic choices -- or rather, omissions -- could be seen as reflecting IETF culture generally.

Over the years, some women have been chosen for IETF positions as authors, working group chairs, area directors, Internet Architecture Board [IAB] members, and IETF Administrative Oversight Committee [IAOC] members. However, the results of the syssters experiment were not encouraging. In spite of their recruiting a disproportionately high number of female candidates, not a single one was selected. Although any one candidate might be rejected for entirely legitimate reasons, a pattern of rejection this consistent suggested an organizational bias. The results were presented at an IETF plenary, and they engendered significant IETF soul-searching, as well as creation of a group to consider diversity issues for the IETF [Div-DT] [Div-Discuss].

Other activities around that same time also engendered IETF consideration of unacceptable behaviors, generally classed as harassment. This resulted in the IESG's issuing a formal IETF anti-harassment policy [Anti-Harass].

Changing an organization's culture is difficult and requires not only commitment to the underlying principles, but also vigilant and sustained effort. The IESG has taken essential first steps. What is needed is going beyond the position papers and expression of ideals, into continuing education of the entire community, and immediate and substantive response to unacceptable behaviors.

2. Concerns

2.1. Diversity

Diversity concerns the variability of a group's composition. It can reasonably touch every conceivable participant attribute. It includes task-related attributes, such as knowledge and experience, as well as the usual range of "identified class" attributes, including race, creed, color, religion, gender and sexual orientation, but also extends to all manner of beliefs, behaviors, experiences, preferences, and economic status.

The factors affecting the quality of group decision-making are complex and subtle, and are not subject to precise specification. Nevertheless, in broad terms, groups with greater diversity make better decisions [Kellogg]. They perform better at diverse tasks both in terms of quantity and quality, and a great deal of research has found that heterogeneity often acts as a conduit for ideas and innovation [WiseCrowd] [Horowitz] [Stahl] [Joshi]. The implicit assumptions of one participant might not be considerations for another and might even be unknown by still others. And, different participants can bring different bases of knowledge and different styles of analysis. People with the same background and experience will all too readily bring the same ideas forward and subject them to the same analysis, thus diminishing the likelihood for new ideas and methods to emerge, or underlying problems to be noted.

However, a desire to diligently attend to group diversity often leads to mechanical, statistical efforts to ensure representation by every identified constituency. For smaller populations, like the IETF and especially for its small management teams, this approach is counterproductive. First, it is not possible to identify every single constituency that might be relevant. Second, the group size does not permit representation by every group. Consequently, in practical terms, legitimate representation of diversity only requires meaningful variety, not slavish bookkeeping. In addition, without care, it can lead to the negative effects of diversity where decision-making is slowed, interaction decreased, and conflict increased [Horowitz].

Pragmatically, then, concern for diversity merely requires serious attention to satisfying two requirements:

Participant Diversity: Decisions about who is allowed into the group require ensuring that the selection process encourages varying attributes among members. That is, this concerns variety in group demographics.

Participation Diversity: Achieving effective generation of ideas and reviews within a group requires ensuring that its discussions encourage constructive participation by all members and that the views of each member are considered seriously. This, then, concerns group dynamics.

In other words, look for real variety in group composition and real variety in participant discussion. This will identify a greater variety of possible and practical solutions.

Obtaining meaningful diversity requires more than generic good will and statements of principle. The challenges, here, are to actively:

- o Encourage constructive diversity
- o Work to avoid group dynamics that serve to reduce diversity
- o Work to avoid group dynamics that serve to diminish the benefits of diversity
- o Remove those dynamics when they still occur

It also requires education about the practicalities of diversity in an open engineering environment, and it requires organizational processes that regularly consider what effect each decision might have on diversity.

Examples abound:

- o Formally, an IETF working group makes its decisions on its mailing list. Since anyone can join the list, anyone with access to the Internet can participate. However, working groups also have sessions at the thrice-annual IETF face-to-face meetings and might also hold interim meetings, which are face to face, by telephone, or by video conference. Attendance at these can be challenging. Getting to a face-to-face meeting costs a great deal of money and time; remote participation often incurs time-shifting that includes very early or very late hours. So, increased working group reliance on meetings tends to exclude those with less funding or less travel time or more structured work schedules.

- o Vigorous advocacy for a strongly held technical preference is common in engineering communities. Of course it can be healthy, since strong support is necessary to promote success of the work. However, in the IETF this can be manifest in two ways that are problematic. One is a personal style that is overly aggressive and serves to intimidate, and hence unreasonably gag, those with other views. The other is a group style that prematurely embraces a choice and does not permit a fair hearing for alternatives.
- o Predictably, engineers value engineering skills. When the task is engineering, this is entirely appropriate. However, many of the IETF's activities, in support of its engineering efforts, are less about engineering and more about human and organizational processes. These require very different skills. To the extent that participants in those processes are primarily considered in terms of their engineering prowess, those who are instead stronger in other, relevant skills will be undervalued, and the diversity of expertise that the IETF needs will be lost.
- o IETF standards are meant to be read, understood, and implemented by people who were not part of the working group process. The gist of the standards also often needs to be read by managers and operators who are not engineers. IETF specifications enjoy quite a bit of stylistic freedom to contain pedagogy, in the service of these audience goals. However, the additional effort to be instructional is significant, and active participants who already understand and embrace the technical details often decline from making that effort. Worse, that effort is also needed during the specification development effort, since many participants might lack the background or superior insight needed to appreciate what is being specified. Yet the IETF's mantra for "rough consensus" is exactly about the need to recruit support. In fact, the process of "educating" others often uncovers issues that have been missed.

2.2. Harassment and Bullying

Many different behaviors can serve to reduce participant diversity or participation diversity. One class of efforts is based on overt actions to marginalize certain participants by intimidating them into silence or departure. Intimidation efforts divide into two styles warranting distinction. One is harassment, which pertains to biased treatment of demographic classes. A number of identified classes are usually protected by law, and community understanding that such biased behavior cannot be tolerated has progressively improved.

Other intimidation efforts are tailored to targeted individuals and are generally labeled bullying [Har-Bul] [Workplace] [Signs] [Escalated] [Prevention]. The nature and extent of bullying in the workplace is widely underestimated, misunderstood, and mishandled. It is described as follows in a WikiHow article [wikiHow]:

...[B]ehavior directed at an employee that is intended to degrade, humiliate, embarrass, or otherwise undermine their performance... [T]he sure signs of a bully that signify more than a simple misunderstanding or personal disagreement... might include:

- * Shouting, whether in private, in front of colleagues, or in front of customers
- * Name-calling
- * Belittling or disrespectful comments
- * Excessive monitoring, criticizing, or nitpicking someone's work
- * Deliberately overloading someone with work
- * Undermining someone's work by setting them up to fail
- * Purposefully withholding information needed to perform a job efficiently
- * Actively excluding someone from normal workplace/staff room conversations and making someone feel unwelcome

In addition, the Tim Field Foundation [Bully-Ser] lists the traits of a "serial bully", paraphrased below:

- o Jekyll and Hyde nature -- Dr Jekyll is 'charming' and 'charismatic'; 'Hyde' is 'evil'
- o Exploits the trust and needs of organizations and individuals, for personal gain
- o Convincing liar -- Makes up anything to fit their needs at that moment
- o Damages the health and reputations of organizations and individuals
- o Reacts to criticism with Denial, Retaliation, Feigned Victimhood [Defensive], [MB-Misuse]

- o Blames victims
- o Apparently immune from disciplinary action
- o Moves to a new target when the present one burns out

Whether directed at classes or individuals, intimidation methods used can:

- o Seem relatively passive, such as consistently ignoring a member
- o Seem mild, such as with a quiet tone or language of condescension
- o Be quite active, such as aggressively attacking what is said by the participant
- o Be disingenuous, masking attacks in a passive-aggressive style

If tolerated by others, and especially by those managing the group, these methods create a hostile work environment [Dealing].

When public harassment or bullying is tolerated, the hostile environment is not only for the person directly subject to the attacks.

The harassment also serves to intimidate others who observe that it is tolerated. It teaches them that misbehaviors will not be held accountable.

The IETF's Anti-Harassment Policy [Anti-Harass] uses a single term to cover the classic harassment of identified constituencies, as well as the targeted behavior of bullying. The policy's text is therefore comprehensive, defining unacceptable behavior as "unwelcome hostile or intimidating behavior." Further, it declares: "Harassment of this sort will not be tolerated in the IETF." An avenue for seeking remedy when harassment occurs is specified as a designated Ombudsperson.

Unified handling of bullying and harassment is exemplified in the policies of many different organizations, notably including those with widely varying membership, even to the point of open, international participation, similar to that of the IETF. Examples include:

Scouts Canada:
Bullying/Harassment Policy [SC-Cybul]

IEEE:

Code of Conduct [IEEE-Cybul]

Facebook:

Community Standards [F-H-Cybul]

LinkedIn:

"Be Nice" in LinkedIn Professional Community Guidelines
[L-H-Cybul]

YouTube:

Harassment and cyberbullying [Y-H-Cybul]

NetHui:

Kaupapa and code of conduct [NetHui]

GeekFeminism:

Conference anti-harassment: Adopting a policy [GeekFeminism]

In fact, there is a view that harassment is merely a form of bullying, given the same goal of undermining participation by the target:

Sexual harassment is bullying or coercion of a sexual nature...
[Wiki-SexHarass]

The IETF has a long history of tolerating aggressive and even hostile behavior by participants. So, this policy signals a formal and welcome change. The obvious challenge is to make the change real, moving the IETF from a culture that tolerates -- or even encourages -- interpersonal misbehaviors to one that provides a safe, professional, and productive haven for its increasingly diverse community.

Here again, examples abound, to the present:

- o Amongst long-time colleagues, acceptable interpersonal style can be whatever the colleagues want, even though it might look quite off-putting to an observer. The problem occurs when an IETF participant engages in such behaviors with, or in the presence of, others who have not agreed to the social contract of that relationship style and might not even understand it. For these others, the behavior can be extremely alienating, creating a disincentive against participation. Yet, in the IETF, it is common for participants to feel entitled to behave in overly familiar or aggressive or even hostile fashion that might be acceptable amongst colleagues, but is destructive with strangers.

- o The instant a comment is made that concerns any attribute of a speaker, such as their motives, the nature of their employer, or the quality of their participation style, the interaction has moved away from technical evaluation. In many cultures, all such utterances are intimidating or offensive. In an open, professional participation environment, they therefore cannot be permitted.
- o As a matter of personal style or momentary enthusiasm, it is easy to indulge in condescending or dismissive commentary about someone's statements. As a discussion technique, its function is to attempt to reduce the target's influence on the group. Whether nonverbal (such as rolling one's eyes), paternalistic (such as noting the target's naivete), or overtly hostile (such as impugning the target's motives), it is an attempt to marginalize the person rather than focus on the merits of what they are saying. It constitutes harassment or bullying.

3. Constructive Participation

The goal of open, diverse participation requires explicit and ongoing organizational effort, concerning group access, engagement, and facilitation.

3.1. Access

Aiding participants with access to IETF materials and discussions means that it is easy for them to:

- o Know what exists
- o Find what is of interest
- o Retrieve documents or gain access to discussions
- o Be able to understand the content

After materials and discussions are located, the primary means of making it easy to access the substance of the work is for statements to be made in language that is clear and explanatory. Writers and speakers need to carefully consider the likely audience and package statements accordingly. This often means taking a more tutorial approach than one might naturally choose. In speech, it means speaking more deliberately, a bit more clearly and a bit more slowly than needed with close collaborators. When language is cryptic or filled with linguistic idiosyncrasies and when speech is too fast, it is dramatically less accessible to a diverse audience.

3.2. Engagement

Once content is accessible, the challenge is to garner diverse contribution for further development. Engagement means that it is easy for constructive participants to be heard and taken seriously through constructive interaction.

Within the IETF, the most common challenge is choosing how to respond to comments. The essence of the IETF is making proposals and offering comments on proposals; disagreement is common and often healthy, depending upon the manner in which disagreement is pursued.

3.3. Facilitation

In order to obtain the best technology, the best ideas need first to be harvested. Processes that promote free-ranging discussion, tease out new ideas, and tackle concerns should be promoted. This will also run to:

- o Encouraging contributions from timid speakers
- o Showing warmth for new contributors
- o Preventing dominance by, or blind deference to, those perceived as the more senior and authoritative contributors
- o Actively shutting down derogatory styles

It is important that participants be facilitated in tendering their own ideas readily so that innovation thrives.

3.4. Balance

There is the larger challenge of finding balance between efforts to facilitate diversity versus efforts to achieve work goals. Efforts to be inclusive include a degree of tutorial assistance for new participants. They also include some tolerance for participants who are less efficient at doing the work. Further, not everyone is capable of being constructive, and the burdens of accommodating such folk can easily become onerous.

As an example, there can be tradeoffs with meeting agendas. There is common pushback on having working group meetings be a succession of presentations. For good efficiency, participants want to have just enough presentation to frame a question, and then spend face-to-face time in discussion. However, "just enough presentation" does not

leave much room for tutorial commentary to aid those new to the effort. Meeting time is always too short, and the primary requirement is to achieve forward progress.

3.5. IETF Track Record

The IETF's track record for making its technical documents openly available is notably superb, as is its official policy of open participation in mailing lists and meetings. Its track record with management and process documentation is more varied, partly because these cover overhead functions, rather than being in the main line of IETF work and, therefore, expertise. So, they do not always get diligent attention. Factors include the inherent challenges in doing management by engineers, as well as challenges in making management and process documents usable for non-experts and non-native English speakers.

On the surface, the IETF's track record for open access and engagement therefore looks astonishingly good, since there is no "membership", and anyone is permitted to join IETF mailing lists and attend IETF meetings. Indeed, for those with good funding, time for travel, and skills at figuring out the IETF culture, the record really does qualify as excellent.

However, very real challenges exist for those who have funding, logistics, or language limitations. In particular, these impede attendance at meetings. Another challenge is for those from more polite cultures who are alienated by the style of aggressive debate that is popular in the IETF.

3.6. Avoiding Distraction

For any one participant, some other participant's contributions might be considered problematic, possibly having little or no value. Worse, some contributions are in a style that excites a personal, negative reaction.

The manner chosen for responding to such contributions dramatically affects group productivity. Attacking the speaker's style or motives or credentials is not useful, and primarily serves to distract discussion from matters of substance. In the face of such challenges and among the many possible ways to pursue constructive exchange, guidance includes:

- o Ignore such contributions; perhaps someone else can produce a productive exchange, but there is no requirement that anyone respond.

- o Respond to the content, not the author; in the extreme, literally ignore the author and merely address the group about the content.
- o Offer better content, including an explanation of the reasons it is better.

The essential point here is that the way to have a constructive exchange about substance is to focus on the substance. The way to avoid getting distracted is to ignore whatever is personal and irrelevant to the substance.

4. Responses to Unconstructive Participation

Sometimes problematic participants cannot reasonably be ignored. Their behavior is too disruptive, too offensive, or too damaging to group exchange. Any of us might have a moment of excess, but when the behavior is too extreme or represents a pattern, it warrants intervention.

A common view is that this should be pursued personally, but for such cases, it rarely has much effect. This is where IETF management intervention is required. The IETF now has a reasonably rich set of policies concerning problematic behavior. So, the requirement is merely to exercise the policies diligently. Depending on the details, the working group chair, mailing list moderator, Ombudsperson, or perhaps IETF Chair is the appropriate person to contact [MLLists] [Anti-Harass].

The challenge, here, is for both management and the rest of the community to collaborate in communicating that harassment and bullying will not be tolerated. The formal policies make that declaration, but they have no meaning unless they are enforced.

Abusive behavior is easily extinguished. All it takes is community resolve.

5. Security Considerations

The security of the IETF's role in the Internet community depends upon its credibility as an open and productive venue for collaborative development of technical documents. More diverse scrutiny leads to increased rigor, so the quality of technical documents will potentially improve. The potential for future legal liability in the various jurisdictions within which the IETF operates also indicates a need to act to reinforce behavioral policies with specific attention to workplace safety.

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