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.

Key Take-Away

We Don’t Do Politics.
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
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHAT DO PEOPLE CARE ABOUT?</th>
<th>WHAT BELIEFS DO THEY HOLD?</th>
<th>HOW DO THESE BELIEFS INFORM CULTURAL PRACTICES?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freedom, autonomy, growth, choice</td>
<td>Human rights advocates impose requirements that contravene IETF’s beliefs about the nature of standards</td>
<td>They bolster resistance against human rights efforts</td>
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<th>HOW DO COMMUNITIES FORM?</th>
<th>WHO IS EXCLUDED?</th>
<th>WHY DOES THIS KNOWLEDGE MATTER?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Long term participation, commercial interests, shared worldviews etc.</td>
<td>People who go against the IETF’s cultural grain, like human rights advocates?</td>
<td>Provides cultural view on how standards happen</td>
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Research Context

Human Rights advocates in the IETF & IRTF
WHY DID THEY STRUGGLE?
03 My Findings

Protocols as rooted in a culture that values individual freedom, voluntarist connection & choice
PROTOCOL NON-PRESCRIPTIVENESS
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?
Conclusions & Q&A
Thank you!