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THE GEOGRAPHY OF 1990S INTERNET GOVERNANCE

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Introduction

In April 2014, after Edward Snowden revealed a widespread, global spying program carried out by the U.S. government against citizens and world leaders, Brazil hosted a meeting of NETmundial, the Global Multistakeholder Meeting on the Future of Internet Governance, to discuss moving away from a U.S.-centric oversight of internet governance structures and towards a global multistakeholder model. In 2016, the contract between the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) and the U.S. Department of Commerce expired, nearly 20 years after it was first established. While the end of that contract did meaningfully address some of the concerns raised by NETmundial, there are many ways in which the U.S.'s powerful position in developing the early commercial internet is still visible. This research seeks to address the question: In what ways were early decisions about the governance of the commercial web shaped by cultural imperialist logics and how was that reflected in policy developed in the mid to late 1990s?

Before the development of the internet as we know it today, economic and political principles developed that would lay the foundation for the internet governance policies that emerged during the president of Bill Clinton. Concerns for economic development that the Reagan administration undertook in the 1980s, reflected in later theories of neoliberalism, seem to run parallel to the 1990s Clinton Administration issues with internet governance. The supremacy of financially weighted votes in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and General Agreement on Trades and Tariffs (GATT) placed wealthy nations in a position to push their agenda through with little consideration for the needs or interests of poorer nations. As Vijay Prashad explicates, this kind of neoliberalism “was less a coherent economic doctrine than a fairly straightforward campaign by the propertied classes to maintain or restore their position of dominance.”

Richards Sennett's *The Culture of New Capitalism* argues that the new economic system that emerged leading up to the establishment of the global internet created growth, but did so at the cost of “greater economic inequality as well as social

instability.” Building this kind of world economy and global communication system requires careful maneuvering, using ‘soft power’ to gain acceptance rather than brute military strength. Joseph S. Nye, Jr. defines soft power as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment,” a model of power that relies on the “attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals, and policies,” and a sense that a country’s “policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others.” Global internet governance very much relies on this kind of power as the West, and particularly the United States, exported its preferences on internet infrastructure abroad. However, without the active consent of other countries, the global network created by the internet would have collapsed. For this reason, the U.S., led by Ira Magaziner, President Clinton’s advisor on internet governance questions, pursued a campaign to promote U.S. principles abroad.

Methods/Critical Frameworks

I examine early internet governance and the discourses of neoliberalism and globalization that emerged during that time through archival analysis. This research focuses on documents found in the Ira Magaziner Electronic Commerce papers at the Clinton Presidential Library in Little Rock, Arkansas. This archive primarily represents the work on internet governance undertaken within the Department of Commerce, the department under which Clinton moved internet governance policy – a shift away from previous oversight coming from the Department of Defense and the National Science Foundation. I apply a political economy of communication framework to this analysis, focusing on concerns for power and look for patterns in media history and history more broadly that explain the patterns in policy development seen in the early history of the commercial internet. In reviewing materials from this archive, I focus on documents that highlight which countries were represented in discussions and debates around internet policy and which countries or regions were excluded. I argue that these groups were intentionally excluded by the U.S., despite being flagged as an issue by a number of other countries, because the U.S. had significant economic and technological power that allowed them to operate without this input. While this alone is unsurprising, it stood in contradiction with narratives around the internet that highlighted its potential for open, equitable, global participation – narratives that the Clinton Administration placed centrally in their own discussions around a commercialized internet.

Findings/Conclusions

The archive suggests, in a piece by the Digital Future Coalition, that Ira Magaziner committed time to working “extensively in developing nations” noting Mexico, Brazil, Singapore, Korea, Taiwan, and Indonesia as the primary focus (Internet Policy [1]). Still, mentions of these countries in the archive was limited and indicated very little direct interaction between these governments and the U.S. government. The instrumental, technological arguments built into earlier periods of modernization theory extended to neoliberal approaches to the internet. If networked technologies were “culturally neutral” tools that could be dropped around the world, then nationally specific needs left out of internet governance talks could also be ignored and the market could be left as the final and best measure of success. Tendencies to idealize the ability of the internet to

overcome geographic boundaries, boundaries synonymous with state governments, buttressed these narratives.

Connection to Conference Themes

This paper addresses concerns related to the conference theme: Decolonizing the Internet. This work looks at the ways in which internet governance policy was established using neoliberal, culturally imperialist logics. In the mid-1990s, the U.S. Department of Commerce positioned itself as the leader for policy making on questions of internet governance while at the same time failing to incorporate input from many countries, particularly those in the Global South. While the 2016 expiration of ICANN's contract with the U.S. Department of Commerce was an important shift towards multistakeholder oversight of internet structures, the power asserted by the U.S. in early policy making is embedded into this system. It is this persistent and embedded influence I explore through this history.

References

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