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A view from the cheap seats: Internet and colonialism

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We live in a postcolonial neocolonized world (Spivak 1990:166)

Facebook launched Free Basics in India in 2015, an initiative promoting free mobile access to some applications and services in the country. A few months later, the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) banned this and other zero rating programs after a public consultation that instigated intense opinions. Soon after the ban, Facebook board member and venture capitalist Marc Andreessen wrote on his Twitter: "Anti-colonialism has been economically catastrophic for the Indian people for decades. Why stop now?"¹.

This paper reacts to Andreessen question by trying to identify, through the lens of postcolonial criticism, relations of power, domination and exploration in the digital environment. Thus, it describes how the West may deploy an Internet model for the global periphery promoting a new form of colonialism: the digital one.

The paper is organized in three sections. First, it introduces what is meant by "digital colonialism". Second, the paper focus on two topics that might serve as an example of a colonialism revisited: access barriers and governance models. Specifically, it emphasizes the establishment of Western programs of free Internet access designed to serve poor countries, focusing on Facebook's Free Basics establishment in India. It also addresses centralized Western policies, analyzing the Internet Corporation for

¹ More on "The Guardian" - Mark Zuckerberg chides board member over 'deeply upsetting' India comments: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/feb/10/facebook-investor-marc-andreessen-apology-offensive-india-tweet-net-neutrality-free-basics>

Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN). Finally, the paper encourages further development on the matter.

Towards digital colonialism?

The colonial approach to Internet related-issues echoes a broader movement that has gotten stronger in social sciences, as well as in cultural, ethnic and racial studies: the postcolonial criticism. Postcolonialism is a set of analytical tendencies which give theoretical and political primacy to unequal relations between the North and South in explaining or understanding the contemporary world (Santos 2007:8). Thus, postcolonial theory has been aimed at assessing and rethinking the historical formation and dilemmas of modernity, focusing on the dominance of Occidentalism, or (not necessarily attached to a geographical precision) the West (Go 2013:4).

Just as with feminism, which has been trying to absorb known theories and ideas and propose a revisited analysis bearing in mind gender-issues, postcolonial theories propose new analysis of known canons from the perspective of authority – the West and the rest, the imperialist and the colonized, exposing the persistence of modern/colonial structures in the contemporary postcolonial period². Thus, this heterodox approach is useful to identify research problems and propose new questions that could not be fully understood apart from the colonial perspective, attempting to think from and at the margins/periphery of the world.

As to apply postcolonial criticism to the Internet, first it is necessary to state how the West/rest division is defined. Edward Said (1978) proposed what would be considered one of the cornerstones of colonial studies. The author analyzed the creation and transmission of intellectual traditions to show how institutions and papers referring to the oriental context created a representation of the East as the *other*, obviously inferior to the West. That implied the occident reduced oriental societies to a monolithic

² Historically, postcolonialism is attached to scholars that used literature to better understand and analyze the hierarchical relation between the explorer and the explored, rereading and reinterpreting classical texts and the textual representation of both the explorer and the explored.

undeveloped bloc in opposition to the Western ones, which saw themselves as developed, rational and superior.

Even though Said's *Orientalism* is focused on the Near and Middle East, its implications reverberated through subaltern and colonial studies. Thus, it is possible to apply Said's idea to a wider conception of the North-South divide, which distinguishes "developed" countries (Northern) from "underdeveloped" or "developing" ones (Southern)³. In this case, what is central is that North-South relations have been historically constituted by colonialism, based in hierarchical and unequal positions between both parts. Another basilar point is that the end of colonialism as a political relationship did not cause the end of colonialism as a social relation, affecting people's mentality and providing a form of authoritarian and discriminatory sociability that is still present in the world (Santos 2007:8).

The postcolonial approach is based primarily on criticism of the scientific knowledge production that, by emphasizing models and contents attached to what is defined as the European rational culture, reproduces the logic of the colonial relationship between the giver and the receiver. Consequently, it questions why should the whole experience of the periphery be compared and measured in accordance with the practice of the center. This comparison resides in the assumption that the Europe- and- American-centrism may propagate, even unconsciously, Western politics, economy and culture almost as universal values, transforming what is non-Western as local and marginal.

However, considering that it is difficult to draw precise borders between countries in the connected global society that seems to be emerging, one might find obsolete an analysis that takes a step back and focus on the North-South divide. Especially on the Internet, an environment surrounded by ideals of plural participation between interested parts and that seeks to balance governmental powers, it is

³ While it is widely accepted that Latin America, Africa and part of Asia are historically attached to colonialism and may be identified as non-Westerns, there is an ongoing debate about whether settler colonies like Canada and Australia should be absent in the postcolonial category due to their relative lack of struggle for independence and the existing bonds with the metropolis - even though some argue in favor of postcolonialism in these places mainly due to the suppression of aborigine culture. A similar discussion concerns China and East Europe, the latter with focus on imperial conquerors of the Soviet Union.

necessary to understand postcolonialism in a wider scope than solely geopolitical imperialism precisely because it is difficult to understand the Internet only through binaries of the global and the local, the North and South.

Postcolonial studies are very connected with modernity itself, a modernity that, over time, expanded the common knowledge, shortened distances and fostered major advances in communication and transportation. It is in this context that the Internet arose, providing an even more connected and rapid environment for the development of communications and global exchange. With old borders being constantly erased, an understanding that the state is not – and perhaps never was – the greatest power in social relations grew. It became a common argument that the governance of everyday decisions occurs transnationally rather than being necessarily limited by geographical or sectoral boundaries - whether be it in the private or public spheres (Osterhammel 2005).

Thus, it is indeed increasingly difficult to define who controls what at the global level, since new actors interact and emerge every day. Nevertheless, global governance does not necessarily forecast the disappearance of states and national governments, nor the disappearance of rules and order. In fact, global governance highlights the increasing scope and breadth of regulatory and governance activities of all kinds; the proliferation of regulatory activities, actors and networks that leads to an explosion of rules and re-ordering of the world (Djelic; Sahlin-Andersson 2006:1).

Just like the Internet, global governance unites a multiplicity of actors, particularly civil society and the private sector, that are increasingly independent of national forces, which makes the hierarchy between groups of actors and between regulatory mechanisms to progressively decrease. However, the networks of transnational regulation, the rise of the experts as a source of authority and all the dynamics of global governance, despite forcing states to work in a coordinated way, may depoliticize in excess global issues if one does not consider how history and context might affect how different players interact and benefit the rich and powerful through a diffuse, technocratic logic (Slaughter 2001:3).

Global governance (and colonialism) shall not be understood as a single phenomenon for everyone – especially considering the colonial history of the world.

Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to structural inequalities in the system and critically understand global governance, shedding light on the machinery by which imbalances and hierarchies of influence, wealth and knowledge are historically reproduced.

Identifying how power plays in global governance and mapping the channels and levers of influence is not an easy task. Regarding the Internet, a promising starting point may be precisely the debate around whether the Internet may propagate historical colonial relations between who is already in the center – the West – and who is in some degree marginalized. Therefore, embedded in this understanding, it is possible not only to identify inequalities in the global system, but also to propose mechanisms to foster plural and equal engagement on the Internet environment.

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Efforts to debate colonialism linked to the Internet and to technological advances arose mainly after the Snowden's revelations regarding the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA) surveillance misdoings. With Snowden, it became a widely recognized fact that the United States not only had the apparatus to monitor the activities of citizens worldwide, but that it was already conducting numerous global surveillance programs, even with cooperation of telecommunication companies and European governments.

The whistleblower ended up helping to increase distrust of formal government institutions and their endeavors with the private sector. Snowden did not only reveal a global surveillance problem. In doing so, he also stressed possible imbalances between who ultimately has more control over technology and who is relegated to a position more of a passive consumer with narrow autonomy, subject to the monitoring of global potencies.

These imbalances are manifested all around the globe and even occur in and between “developed” countries. Still, they may be even greater between the center and the periphery, the West holder of expertise and primacy and the *rest*. This division seems to be reinforced by a paradox: if on the one hand the Internet can democratize

spaces and give voice to minorities, on the other it can reinforce inequalities and Western worldviews. This paradox is at the heart of digital colonialism, in which even with a possible comprehensive access to the Internet and technological resources, disparities remain marking the relationship between who is or who is not integrated in the global society. Digital colonialism then may express the effort the global center undertakes, even unconsciously, in molding and narrowing the periphery's experience, affecting and even controlling the digital relations of the South.

At the base of this paradox is the almost part of the social imaginary idea that the Internet is an intrinsically democratizing tool that promotes development and reduces barriers, as it has allowed the flourishing of countless initiatives that helped democratize the access to information, communication and knowledge. However, an uncritical excitement over the Internet may lead to what Mosco (2004) calls the "digital sublime":

the incessant repetition of the mantra that the technology has a revolutionary potential to fulfil the deepest human aspiration, to create a world in which disease will be conquered, distance won't matter, and communication will be both instantaneous and universal.

The Internet has the potential to function as a distributive tool that facilitates the communication and reduces barriers, but it also presents hierarchical cleavages in its structure and usage. One of the emblematic examples that demonstrates that the Internet will not lead to the best of the world only by its more distributive nature is the "network effect": the trend towards concentration and centralization with users converging towards more popular services and helping the formation of large monopolies, with high economic accumulation and concentration of power (Burch 2013:132). This popular services, if not fully developed in the West, generally has some connection (financial or structural) to it. Based on that, even debates about postcolonial computing emerged, a trend that points to the many ways histories, power relations, and epistemology tacitly underpin engagements in technological design, offering researchers and technologists new lines of inquiry and new forms of architecture (Irani et. all 2010:1312).

A derived problem from this concentration is media control and information monopoly. Here, the main concern is precisely the potential for culture, language and

news from one part of the globe to dominate all else and the potential for Western mechanisms or platforms to dictate or shape the media content – and the rise of algorithms and the prominence of the English language online only aggravate the problem. This concentration reflects even greater challenges when focusing in non-Western societies that still struggle to have their population able to access the Internet at all.

Regarding the access problem, it is important to highlight that almost every country strives to have its peripheral communities connected to the Internet. However, the global South is having more difficulties to overcome digital exclusion both internally and externally – struggling to connect its population and to be relevant to the Internet Ecosystem as a whole. Many initiatives are trying to solve this problem. Some of them are designed and promoted by Western corporations interested in connecting remote parts of the world. While the practical purpose of these endeavors – reducing the digital divide – is reasonable, it is necessary to understand their implications under a wider perspective that analyzes who ultimately will have control of technology and access.

Debating Free Basics

Recall the zero rating debate in India. After intense and controversial public consultations, the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India issued a ban on all forms of differential pricing in data services – including zero-rated programs, with few exemptions for public emergency and closed electronic networks services (TRAI 2016). Shortly after the decision, one of Facebook’s board members vocalized what some Indians were already stating⁴, linking Free Basics ban with anti-colonialist efforts. This paper does not argue about the nature of TRAI’s decision or discuss if zero rating programs may or may not be useful to solve access problems. Instead, it aims to demonstrate only a specific point regarding the Free Basics debate: how digital inclusion in “underdeveloped” countries have much to do with who control the Internet and how the Internet is spread by Western initiatives.

⁴ More in [“TRAI bars Facebook’s Data Colonialism.”](#)

Digital Inclusion has become a global goal, since the Internet itself has become an important part of everyday life. Thus, the Facebook ideal for an interconnected world fits digital inclusion purposes. Back on 2013, Mark Zuckerberg, the CEO of the Company, published a white paper entitled “Is connectivity a Human Right?”, setting the basis for Internet.org, the program that later would encompass Free Basics⁵. The document states that:

since the internet is so fundamental, we believe everyone should have access and we’re investing a significant amount of our energy and resources into making this happen. Facebook has already invested more than \$1 billion to connect people in the developing world over the past few years, and we plan to do more. [...] If we get this right, then it will be possible to enable the most people to get on the internet while also sustainably generating the most profits for the industry (Facebook 2013).

Free Basics is not the only company-lead initiative designed to fight for digital inclusion. It is however the one that has been given more attention, especially due to the rhetoric and functioning of Zuckerberg’s Corporation. The program is focused on the global South, thus reinforcing the real existence of a North/South division. Up to the present, Free Basics is present in 53 countries: 23 African countries (including Zambia, the first one to receive the initiative), 11 Asian, 18 Latin American and, in the Middle East, Iraq.

In India, Facebook launched Free Basics in February 2015 in partnership with the Indian leading Internet Service Provider (ISP) *Reliance Communications*. Reliance was then the fourth largest telecom company in the country. Initially, the service was available only in some states, providing access to 38 sites and services, including Facebook, Messenger, newspapers such as India Today and BBC, Wikipedia, the search engine “Bing” and the Indian government app “AP Speaks”.

The strategy used by the company to implement its program in India followed a similar protocol to that adopted in other countries. Zuckerberg kept in touch with the

⁵ Some Civil Society organizations initially criticized Facebook’s project “Internet.org” for its name, stating that Facebook shouldn’t use the term “Internet” as if the access promoted represented the Internet and that it shouldn’t use “.org”, a top-level domain commonly linked to non-governmental and non-profit initiatives. In September 2015, Facebook relaunched Internet.org service as Free Basics, also opening the platform to any site or content willing to obey certain guidelines to optimize performance on older phones and slower networks connections provided (no video files, VoIP, file transfers, and high-resolution photos), thus granting some competition and plurality in the platform.

local government and visited India a couple of times. Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended Facebook's events and the company even launched a fund of one million dollars for the creation of applications for India in a forum dedicated to Internet.org held in New Delhi in 2014.

A month after Free Basics launch in India, another telco, Bharti Airtel, announced its zero-rated service 'Airtel Zero', a competing platform led by the Indian telecommunications company with more penetration in the country. Following the attention given to these initiatives, TRAI launched a public consultation on zero-rating in the beginning of 2015. The consultation was held a second time in November of that same year.

TRAI had already conducted a similar process in 2006, but with no concrete legal results. This time, however, a loose coalition of tech-entrepreneurs, internet freedom activists and free/libre open source software launched a nationwide campaign entitled "Save the Internet" that mobilized Internet users who sent over one million emails in support of a strict notion of net neutrality to TRAI. Facebook also started a counter-offensive campaign, using Facebook itself as a tool of mobilization. The debate polarized into two distinct opinions: some in favor of pricing innovations as a creative solution to fight the access divide and some concerned about the emergence of a lesser internet for users with limited ability to pay for a "full" access (Gurumurthy; Chami 2016:3).

By the end of February 2016, the Regulatory Authority issued a resolution prohibiting services that discriminate data packets, taking a stand in favor of a strict version of network neutrality. It was in this context that Andreessen posted his comment on colonialism, stating that "anti-colonialism has been economically catastrophic for the Indian people for decades. Why stop now?". Shortly after the comment, Mark Zuckerberg commented on his Facebook page that he was deeply troubled by Andreessen's remark, which did not represent what he or Facebook thought about the topic, high lightening that the company "stands for helping to connect people and giving them voice to shape their own future" (Zuckerberg 2016).

Andreessen also apologized for his tweet, which served as a reinforcement to the argument that Free Basics was intrinsically bad for India. Some Indian public figures

also went shared their opinions. Chief Minister of Odisha, for example, sent a formal letter to the Telecom Regulator against Free Basics arguing that “while the underprivileged deserve much more than what is available, nobody should decide what exactly are their requirements. If you dictate what the poor should get, you take away their rights to choose what they think is best for them” (Patnaik 2016).

Moreover, Political Party “Aam Aadmi” also stated that they believe

the innovative youth (of India) will give us the next Google, Facebook or Whatsapp. However, if some websites or applications or services are offered free or at faster speeds, the balance tips towards established players with deeper pockets which kills the innovative young start-ups that will emanate from this ecosystem (AAM AADMI 2016).

Thus, the debate in India was accompanied by a concern over who was and is being left behind in technological advancements and how this gap is being addressed. Without labelling all corporation-lead initiatives as patronizing, a postcolonial approach to this topic precisely highlights the globalized access logic manifested in a western-corporation program that might induce a certain Internet model to those who still are not connected and that might also diminish complex issues such as cultural autonomy and economic control.

Ultimately, Facebook might depoliticize the debate about its access initiatives by not recognizing its background and economic interest and by using a discourse embedded in a prophetic and poetic language that aims to diminish its critics, hiding interests behind its expertise and economical power. Initiatives like Free Basics generally focus on the advantages of the program and its humanitarian aspect rather than discussing deeply with other stakeholders both their benefits and harms, leading the public sphere to divide into extremes without addressing criticism directly. Thus, the depoliticized Facebook myth claiming for the end of the digital divide have the dual advantage that it hides the existence of winners and losers, whilst simultaneously capturing the imagination and mobilizing people to actively support it (Mosco 2004).

In attempting to depoliticize a subject, big corporations may be opportunist using an ingenious discourse to legitimize their doings and misdoings. In this specific case, Facebook tries to disqualify its critics stating that people that already share the privilege

to access the Internet should not criticize an initiative whose main principle is to bring access to regions that have no other feasible way to be connected. Andreessen even stated that trying to prevent people from accessing the Internet through Free Basics for *ideological* purposes was morally wrong (Gurumurthy; Chami 2016:11).

However, the digital inclusion matter is public by nature and like so it should be debated, contested and disputed over its policy process at to generate solutions that are well-thought and encompassing. Moreover, once you are a big corporation, already in a position of privilege in a country that still struggle to provide basic rights, to diminish your private interests or to try to label your opponent as “morally” wrong, ungrateful or even elitist is to underestimate and oversimplify the very people you are targeting.

Facebook’s technology – manifested in the Free Basics application – is presented as a viable solution to the exclusion of the people from the Global South⁶. However, its global intent and approach demonstrate that it is an initiative that hardly tries to build specific solutions to specific societies. Instead, a ready-to-go remedy is baked under a Western worldview that directly benefits a Western power, raising concerns over who ultimately will be benefiting from that and who will be relegated to a position of submission.

As Spivak (2010) stated, the colonial binary which establishes the West as the pattern to be followed by all silences the subalterns of the world, those who are excluded and peripheral, suffocating their cultural, historical, academic and social experiences. In this case, Free Basics might as well represent a lucrative Western initiative that, by partnering with local elites and making slight local adaptations along the way, ends up molding the way people from the South will access the Internet. While connecting people to the Internet so they can speak, it also confines and restricts what it means to be connected to a closed platform.

As pointed out by Indian blogger Anil Dash in a comment in Zuckerberg’s post in his official page:

at a broad level, it might be useful to really, really reckon with the history of Western corporate powers enforcing their desires on a broad

⁶ The experience in India also shows that part of the target audience of the platform in Southern countries may not be the poorer, but those that already have some access and that might benefit from accessing some features for free.

swath of the Indian population, especially India's poorest. There are things that India, Indians (and those of us in the diaspora) place a very high value on for historical reasons that should be obvious with some thought. A colonialist "trust us, it's for your own benefit" pitch is a hard sell with good reason. [...] In short, Internet.org may be a fundamentally wrong structure for delivering these kinds of services because it doesn't empower people to create solutions for themselves that are culturally and contextually appropriate (Anil Dash 2016).

Besides the network neutrality issue and concerns over Facebook's monopoly that permeates the Free Basics debate, what must be exposed and debated regarding western initiatives to end the digital divide is the possible imposition of a model for how people from the South will access and understand the Internet as whole. The West identifies a problem – the lack of access – that is very different from its own reality (even though “developed” countries struggle with access barriers, the context is indeed different). It creates solutions for this problem, even without fully understanding it. It might listen to some Southern voices over the matter, but still, the solution will be already pre-thought and pre-established.

Thus, the debate over digital inclusion initiatives like Free Basics should not evolve only around whether the ban of zero rating means denying for ideological reasons the world's poorest free partial Internet connectivity. The issue is not only bringing connectivity for all, but recognizing that the digital divide is part of a greater hierarchical problem that is based in a strong socio-economic divide.

Currently, to be connected is to be a step closer to the global center. Thus, considering that, with colonialism, non-Westerns are seen as a pre-stage of the occidental, a category to be developed in an evolutionary and hierarchical scale that ends up in the rational-Western-society (Costa 2006:122), to be connected through a Western ready-to-go program might also be a step further into becoming “civilized” and molded to the Western pattern.

Besides, industrial cartels and liberal marketization gain more space in the global governance environment, fostering private services and the rule of governance expertise. This may lead to Western initiatives suppressing local manifestations or expressions of actors with less force in an already consolidated global system (Murphy 2000:795), as it is hard to fight against an already consolidated program with strong

background⁷. Moreover, even local initiatives might reproduce the hegemonic discourse through its elites. In India, and this is true for other countries as well, local enterprises also created their own Free Basics-like initiatives, following a market-directed approach and competing under the Western proposed model.

Besides, transparency and plural participation are important features that shall be considered when addressing the digital divide. Especially in Southern countries, a private-Western initiative might be more welcomed if it bears in mind the necessity to work with local communities, not only listening vaguely their problems, but engaging them in an autonomous way and being clear on both its motivation and advantages.

Still, the propagation of Western ideals is not only true in the digital divide debate. Many entities that compose the Internet Governance sphere are mostly composed by Western agents (among them, organizations like the Internet Engineering Task Force, IETF, and the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, ICANN) that, even though might be open to plural participation, are difficult to access for those who lack the ability to speak English, to travel or to have sufficient technical knowledge. Thus, it is important to expand the analysis to a more specific aspect of the Internet, shedding light on Internet Governance and its most recognized governance model, multistakeholderism.

What can be learned from the Multistakeholder model?

Snowden's surveillance revelation impacted significantly the Internet governance sphere, fostering, among other things, debates over the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN). ICANN is a private non-profit corporation created in 1998 to coordinate the allocation and assignment of Internet Protocol addresses, accredit generic top-level domain (gTLD) name registrars, manage the operation of root name servers and more. Some of ICANN's functions are performed

⁷ Gurumurthy and Chami also stated that the discussion about Facebook and Free Basics in India shows an unethical use by Facebook of its own platform for political propaganda. For them, Facebook's campaign configured a capture of the Internet to expand and reinstate its market power (2016:11).

by IANA, the Internet Assigned Numbers Authority. Since its origin, the IANA functions were overseen by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) of the United States Department of Commerce, under a contractual arrangement between both parties.

In March 2014, the United States announced its intention to pass on the supervision of the IANA functions to the global Internet community (NTIA 2014). To do so, they asked ICANN to initiate a democratic, participatory and open process to define principles and mechanisms to guide the transition. After a long period of intense debates, the NTIA confirmed in August 2016 that the ICANN's Consensus created over the IANA transition met its criteria and that the functions were going to be administrated by the global community, based on the participation of different stakeholders from all over the world (NTIA 2016).

The transition, however, was not totally peaceful, as some U.S. representatives questioned the passing of IANA functions to the global community as a way to give the Internet to authoritarian foreign forces, like China and Russia, that could block Internet's good functioning and threaten freedom of expression. Back on August, Donald Trump, the Republican candidate for the 2016 U.S. elections, even affirmed that he opposed "President Obama's plan to surrender American Internet control to foreign powers", stating that the "U.S. created, developed and expanded the Internet across the globe" (Trump Press Release 2016).

Trump's allegation resonates Ted Cruz's campaign against the IANA transition. Cruz, a Republican Senator from Texas, altogether with other members of the Congress, opposed to ICANN's proposal to end "United States government oversight of key operating functions of the Internet" (Cruz Press Release 2016). Moreover, attorneys general of Arizona, Oklahoma, Texas and Nevada filed a lawsuit asking a Federal district court to temporarily halt the transition just hours before the handoff was scheduled to occur, claiming among other things that the "U.S. Government has been principally responsible for funding the development of Internet" and that IANA's transition could threaten not only the First Amendment Right, but also fail to secure U.S. ownership of .GOV and other domains, representing an illegal giveaway of U.S. property (2016). The

ultimate idea seemed to be that, under U.S. dominance, ICANN could guarantee free speech worldwide and assure the good functioning of the Internet for all without interference of authoritarian parties.

To state that ICANN has the power to guarantee freedom of expression and to confound the IANA functions with the whole functioning of the Internet are already misconceptions. However, a great point of misunderstanding resides in the sole notion of a U.S. centric Internet administration. In the core of the IANA transition debate is the concept of multistakeholderism – the model widely used in the Internet Governance (IG) environment that highlights the participation of multiple stakeholders on Internet decisions in an equal-footing environment in multi-player and multi-layer governance processes. This governance model, defended by ICANN itself, when applied in IG, aims to assure that no country or stakeholder group dominate important decisions regarding the Internet.

How to account for a U.S. central role in the Internet Governance within a multistakeholder setting? Shortly after the Snowden's revelations, the group of technical organizations in charge of coordinating the global technical infrastructure of the Internet (the I* Organizations, like the Internet Society, the Internet Engineering Task Force – IETF, regional Internet address registries and ICANN itself) released the Montevideo Statement on the Future of Internet Cooperation. The Statement recognized undermining of the trust due to revelations of surveillance and "called for accelerating the globalization of ICANN and IANA functions, towards an environment in which all stakeholders, including governments, participate on an equal footing (Montevideo Statement 2014).

The whole purpose of the Statement seemed to be the canalization of "community-wide efforts towards the evolution of global multistakeholder Internet cooperation", diminishing the central-position of the U.S. in ICANN. Soon after that, the I* Organizations (1Net) united with the Brazilian government, which had been demanding action against surveillance after Snowden, and proposed NETmundial, a global meeting to discuss the reformation of Internet governance.

In this context, suspicions against multistakeholderism arose, stating the fear that this model might in fact give greater power to corporations and specific countries (e.g. the United States) in a neoliberal project, preventing the existence of a democratic environment for decision-making. Per this point of view, multistakeholderism in fact might give veto power to private corporations and deny public good or public interest, mainly for having no international norms to constrain corporate power. Thus, to address the issue, a greater role for the state in regulating the Internet is highlighted, claiming that states – at least in theory – are more responsible regarding the public good since they must be accountable to their own citizens (Just Net Coalition 2014; Purkayastha and Bailey 2014; Society for Knowledge Commons Contribution 2014). Generally, this line of thought also claim for the establishment of clearly defined roles for each stakeholder group in multistakeholder settings and tends to strengthen countries' power to protect decisions from being too much influenced by private pressures or unilateral and hegemonic nations (Bhuiyan 2014; Hill 2013).

The debate regarding the role of governments in Internet Governance is common. One of ICANN's ideal is to keep the global Domain Name System out of a restricted government control, preventing the domain world from national jurisdictions. To do so, it was necessary a transnational governance model that provided space for civil society, the private sector, the technical community and other stakeholders that might be interested and relevant to the DNS, diminishing the impact of governments. This model already functions in ICANN, whose approach essentially relies on the participation of various entities and individuals from different stakeholder groups through a bottom-up, consensus-driven process.

However, even if the ICANN stakeholder community is not confined to the United States and is indeed composed by many stakeholders, its current setting may even unconsciously and for representativeness issues propagate a Western worldview, since there is a massive presence of Westerns in comparison to non-Westerns occupying ICANN seats and attending its meetings (see AFNIC Diversity Report, 2016) and since, for a long time, ICANN was partly subordinated to an U.S. oversight.

Decisions taken by ICANN are not necessarily unsatisfactory due to a lack of balance between parties. Still, because the community is embedded in a multistakeholder discourse where Western political and economic agents share an advantageous position, there is a constant risk of undermining the diversity and plural features the Internet promises to sustain. Equality regarding participation is not necessary only between stakeholders, granting, for example, equal footing for civil society. Who is who in multistakeholder arenas matters. Even if there is a space with plural and equal spaces for each stakeholder group, the setting might still be biased if these stakeholders only represent a specific part of the world and if they share specific common interests.

This happens because plural participation of individuals and entities attached to stakeholder groups may foster diversity of standpoints but does not guarantee diversity of interests. Belli (2015) suggest a turn to a “heterostakeholder” model instead of a multistakeholder one precisely to ensure diversity of opinions as well as geographical origin, rather than merely relying on a “quantitative approach” that categorizes those attending Internet governance spheres as Civil Society, Private Sector, Technical Community and so on without fully understanding what are the interests being portrayed (Belli 2015:7).

Members of different stakeholder groups may share almost identical interests or even financially support each other, leading to over-representation of a specific position or countries. On the other hand, entities identified to the same stakeholder group may have different or divergent interests but still some of these interests may be underrepresented either because few members of a given stakeholder group have the resources to participate or because some groups do not even know how to engage and whether there are places they can be part of (Belli 2015:3).

Furthermore, the need for a pluralization of interests represented in ICANN – and in other IG spheres – is highly linked to a conception sensible to the North-South divide, even in a transnational and heterogeneous environment like the Internet. Spivak (1999) suggest a better understanding of the current North-South divide by seeing the “third world” as a displacement of former colonies in the same way that colonialism

displaces itself as neocolonialism - an enterprise of imperialism that is not territorial (Spivak 1999:1). ICANN is no neocolonial empire, as it deals only with a narrow aspect of the Internet and as it lays its legitimacy on a global community. However, for its multistakeholder model to properly advance and be effective, it is necessary to question and criticize who is controlling what in this environment, not diminishing inequalities that may persist under the multistakeholder discourse and that, in the end, might help the centralization of the Internet architecture under a few hands that indeed may propagate new colonial practices over the global South.

Besides, balance between stakeholders and the definition of who exactly is representing each group is in the core of the multistakeholderism debate (Belli 2015; Carr 2015). Just to state the necessity of the multistakeholder model or to invite plural participation without defining precise roles and authorities turns Internet governance into an unstable environment subject to asymmetries and hierarchies that should not persist, since just the pretension of an equal-footing space does not guarantee the effectiveness of that, especially regarding how power is distributed among stakeholders (Mueller 2010:265). This is especially true considering that many of the I* organization, both due to their composition and funding, are disproportionately responsive to U.S. preferences, implying in an overrepresentation of the U.S (Schiller 2015:356).

As of October 1, 2016, the IANA functions contract expired and the coordination and management of Internet's identifiers rested privatized and in the hands of the volunteer-based ICANN multistakeholder community (ICANN 2016). ICANN post-transition will propagate the Corporation's notions of legitimacy and authority over other areas not limited to the logical layer of the Internet. Thus, asymmetries present in this organization may also occur in the development and the expansion of overall Internet policies. This community then has the challenge to balance and accommodate interests and work with a definition of multistakeholderism that is not blind to power asymmetries under the "all stakeholders included" argument.

The multistakeholder model indeed offers a lot of benefits concerning plural participation and global governance mechanisms. However, defending the model does not necessarily mean diminishing its flaws. As for the postcolonial criticism,

multistakeholderism as present in some Internet governance spaces may concentrate, rather than disperse, power. It may reinforce and legitimize existing power relations rather than disrupt them (Chenou 2010). Thus, it may reinforce existing power dynamics that were already established since the beginning of the model, privileging Western countries (in this case, most specifically the U.S government) and the private sector from the North (Carr 2015:655), a dynamic that is being exposed by colonialism for a long time.

Even regarding civil society, an asymmetric dynamic may arise. If the civil society actively engaging in global Internet Governance spaces is mainly composed by Western organizations and users, non-Westerns people and “undeveloped” countries are still underrepresented. The expertise level required to participate in those spaces may also be another form of exclusion and a discourse that is hard to combat, also accentuating the dominance of participants from the North and of Civil Society-professionals that could potentially lead to a (neo)corporatist and elitist relationship between Civil Society and state actors (Cammaerts 2011:10).

Thus, a postcolonial criticism of Internet Governance, without necessarily reinforcing a simplistic multilateral worldview that might as well privilege non-Western countries, might state that, for multistakeholderism to properly function and be developed, it is necessary to understand and avoid old practices embedded in colonialism, trying to prevent practices that centralize power on the hands of a few privileged Western group.

Calling for further debate

The historical process of decolonization showed that, even with many countries becoming formerly independent, Western power over the globe did not disappear. While colonial relations officially ended, the older power hierarchies took on more subtle forms. The West was no longer the center of traditional colonial power, but retained its cultural force, beckoning the ex-colonized to be like it. This relation helps

understand inequalities and power discrepancies between the global South and North that persist even in the Internet.

This paper aimed to bring some of the discussions regarding postcolonialism to analyze Internet policies and the Internet government environment. Anibal Quijano (2000) classically emphasized the concentration of global resources under the control and benefit of a few Western minority, especially concentrating resources in the hands of these countries' elites. As shown, this concentration is also present in the Internet, as not only many corporate-lead initiatives seek to expand their influence over Southern countries under the guise of digital inclusion, but also as some of the Internet architecture is concentrated in the global center, especially in the United States.

The ideal of a decentralized Internet means that no entity or country should have the power to shape the Internet toward its own advantage. For this to happen, it is necessary to analyze critically what are the current Internet-related trends that might propagate an unbalanced environment. In this paper, only two examples were briefly considered, the Free Basics Initiative and ICANN's setting.

Many other focal points in the Internet can be examined through the lens of colonial relations, and even the examples in this paper shall be further developed. Thus, in a world where many topics challenge researchers, like surveillance and privacy issues, the rule of algorithms, Internet shutdowns, the technical architecture of the Internet and authoritarian attempts to undermine it, an approach designed to shed light over inequalities and power asymmetries between the center and the periphery may be useful in analyzing other centralization and control mechanisms manifested in the Internet.

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