INFORMATION SPACE POWER AND EMPOWERMENT IN A CHANGING WORLD

A reflection on the 2012 Milton Wolf Seminar by Leshuo Dong

This year’s Milton Wolf Seminar, with its theme, “Transitions Transformed: Ideas of Information and Democracy Post-2011,” brought us all together to think about how the governance of information space shifts global power dynamics. Participants from all over the world discussed internet regulation, media law cases, and media development in a global context. Across the range of case studies—from consideration of media and information consumption patterns in Iran, to the lessons of the Arab Spring, to American government notions of internet freedom, to China’s declaration of internet sovereignty—I was struck by the current and potential power that information flows have to transform global power dynamics, particularly as domestic debates about the governance of informational space are increasingly conducted under the global spotlight.

As highlighted during the seminar discussions, especially in the session entitled “The International Political Economy of the Internet: Technologies of Freedom and Technologies of Control,” there are intense debates regarding what players and what principles should govern domestic and international informational spaces. While the Internet was invented in the United States, its increasing popularity and importance prompt international discussions that could have significant repercussions for its future evolution. The development and application of shared principles, norms, rules, decision-making procedures, and programs that shape the regulation and use of the Internet are at the center of these ongoing debates. According to my understandings and observations, critical questions that were raised during the Milton Wolf Seminar presentations and discussions were:

- Does the Internet need a global regulator?
- Will there be a set of globally accepted principles related to internet governance?
- And what should be the most important elements of this possible global commons?

To think about these questions, we must consider several dimensions of power and empowerment in the informational space. First, some states are attempting to transport the traditional power that they wield over “old media” technologies like radio, TV, or telecom to the Internet. In the short term, however, there’s no way that any government could “take over the Internet.” Not only is this technically impossible, but the Internet’s culture is too decentralized for any single power to effectively take control. Nonetheless, we should be aware that many countries across the globe are hoping to gain a greater power over how the Internet operates. Some are trying to retain the dominant position that they held over telecom and broadcast media regulation. Others claim that security concerns necessitate that they exert similar control over the Internet.

Some governments are accused of fearing that open information flows will lead to regime change or at least threaten to their rule; other governments seek to protect their
information spaces out of calls for populism, nationalism, or trade protectionism, etc. However, to discern the influence of political power on internet governance, we need more systematic analysis on why and how governmental proposals to replace the Internet’s decentralized and open system should be resisted. Current multilateral systems of internet governance are facing problems. It seems that there is no unity or cohesion among the actors who oppose state efforts to increase control over the Internet through regulation and governance. Another concern is that many of those who oppose more government internet regulation do not present a viable alternative. A collaborative spirit regarding the Internet is easier said than done. While many actors promote multi-stakeholder internet regulation, which refers to the process of bringing together diverse players and ensuring they have a voice in policy making process, the rhetoric is far from the reality. The problem is that multi-stakeholder approaches might be a helpful during the policy negotiations process, but the outcome cannot be ensured. In other words, multi-stakeholder policymaking doesn’t ensure that the agreed-upon principles or policies will prevent different political and corporate actors from asserting more control over the Internet.

Many of the seminar discussions focused on how different political actors exert influence over the governance of informational space; corporate control was not as big a focal point during the seminar. Despite the widespread benefits of cross-border data flows to economic growth, in the past decade people have begun to worry about how to ensure that the international market for ICT is fair and contestable. Technically, broadband providers have the ability to block internet service, applications, and content; telephone or cable companies are also able to slow down competing or undesired content. Hence new media companies, including Amazon and Google, as well as public interest groups have raised calls for "network neutrality." But does "neutrality" adequately address more fundamental changes that broadband and cable monopolies are seeking in their quest to monetize the Internet? If not, how should we prevent the Internet from becoming a medium that functions solely as a marketing tool of commercial institutions, and not as a relay of civic-related communications? It is critical for businesses around the world that electronic goods and services move across borders as freely as possible; but without proactive intervention from the public, the international rules governing flows of digital goods, services, data and infrastructure are incomplete because they don’t necessarily serve the values and issues that we should care about, like civil rights.

The issues discussed above are enough to serve as a wake-up call for the world’s two billion plus Internet users, whose rights might be further threatened by the push for ever-greater control by states and corporations. The Internet has, in a relatively short amount time, become an essential instrument for today’s citizens. Take China for example, the population of Internet users has reached five million and the number of applications users has also dramatically increased since 2010. The relationship between access to media and other information sources and citizen empowerment is a critical issue to consider when discussing internet regulation. It is obvious that the increasing convergence of information, multimedia, and transmission technologies is having a rapid fundamental social, economic and political impact on both the developing and developed worlds. Over the last few years, the deployment and exploitation of technology in support of socio-economic development has been a high priority on the development agenda, especially in the Global South. ICT4D
programs have been implemented in places like Asia and Africa out of the belief that creativity and innovation can flourish when citizens have access to computers, servers, routers and mobile devices, and services such as cloud computing.

As underlined in the remarks made by seminar participants, in the past decade, the world has already witnessed historic internet policy debates over various issues like online intellectual property, privacy, cyber attacks, and so on. These issues have divided many organizations, academics, companies, and policymakers in the United States and Europe. However, how can the debates concentrated in the West really become a “global” debate? How should this debate lead people to a more thorough understanding of the powers that controls the global informational space? And how and when will people realize the power that they already have or should have? Inspired by the seminar discussions, I was very glad to be able to think about these questions; and I believe more studies on the Internet’s current and potential roles around the globe are sorely needed to reach a common ground.

About the Author

Leshuo Dong
PhD Candidate, Tinghua University,
Visiting Scholar, Center for Global Communication Studies at the University of Pennsylvania Annenberg School for Communication
Email: dongleshuo[AT]gmail.com

Leshuo Dong was selected as an Emerging Scholar Delegate to the 2012 Milton Wolf Seminar. She is a PhD candidate specializing in international communication and comparative media studies at the School of Journalism and Communication at Tsinghua University in Beijing, China. Her research interests lie in public diplomacy, comparative media policy and global internet governance. She is currently a visiting scholar at the Center for Global Communication Studies at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. At CGCS, she works on China’s public diplomacy in United States, with a special focus on China’s “going out” media policy. She has published several papers in leading Chinese academic journals, including the Journal of International Communication, Chinese Journalist, and Introduction to Journalism Research. As a member of International Association for Media and Communication Research, she has also presented papers at the annual conference in 2010 and 2011. Her working experience includes Global Media Journal, China Central Television, and China Youth Daily.
About the 2012 Milton Wolf Seminar
Launched in 2001, the Milton Wolf Seminar Series aims to deal with developing issues in diplomacy and journalism – both broadly defined. Using case studies such as Hungary, Iran, Syria, Egypt, and Tunisia, the 2012 Milton Wolf Seminar, Transitions Transformed: Ideas of Information and Democracy Post-2011 explored the evolving relationship between media and democratic transition in light of rapid technological change and the shifting structure and dynamics of the international communication system. The seminar was jointly organized by the Center for Global Communication Studies (CGCS) at the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School for Communication, The American Austrian Foundation (AAF), and the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna (DA). More information about this and previous seminars is available on the Milton Wolf Seminar website [http://global.asc.upenn.edu] and our Facebook Page [https://www.facebook.com/MiltonWolfSeminar].