

Milton Mueller, **Will the Internet Fragment? Sovereignty, Globalization, and Cyberspace**, Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2017, 140 pp., \$12.95 (paperback), \$8.99 (e-book), \$45.00 (hardcover).

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Two decades ago, the policy-making process surrounding the Internet's technological and legal architecture, known as *Internet governance*, existed at the margins of academic and geopolitical circles. With the Internet's economic and political ascendance, Internet governance has since moved to the forefront of scholarly and political debates (see, e.g., Choucri, 2012; DeNardis, 2014; Powers and Jablonski, 2015). At the center of these discussions is the issue of fragmentation (sometimes referred to, with less historical sensitivity, as *Balkanization*), broadly understood as the splintering of what was once thought to be a single Internet with universal characteristics into increasingly dissimilar local variations.



In *Will the Internet Fragment? Sovereignty, Globalization, and Cyberspace*, Milton Mueller methodically explores what fragmentation is and is not, as well as what kind of threat it poses to cyberspace. Mueller, professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology School of Public Policy and codirector of the Internet Governance Project, an online scholarly platform, has been a leading thinker and writer in the field of Internet governance since its early days. In his new book, Mueller argues that what supporters of the global Internet should be principally concerned about is state sovereigns' efforts to align global communications along the borders of national jurisdictions. He also suggests how to preserve the benefits of digital globalization, recommending that enthusiasts of the Internet's emancipatory promise forge a transnational virtual nation committed to the principles of borderless communication and take global Internet governance into their own hands.

In some respects, *Will the Internet Fragment?* can be understood as the third volume in Mueller's recent monographs, which chronicle the political–economic development of Internet governance over the past three decades. Mueller's 2002 publication *Ruling the Root: Internet Governance and the Taming of Cyberspace* recounts the institutionalization of Internet governance in the 1990s, a decade during which powerful state and commercial interests entered the domain. *Networks and States: The Global Politics of Internet Governance* (Mueller, 2010) explores the central tension of Internet governance in the 2000s between the global reach of cyberspace and the bounded territoriality of the sovereign nation-state. *Will the Internet Fragment?* picks up on the main theme of *Networks and States*, focusing pointedly on what Mueller considers to be “the core Internet governance question of our time” (loc. 71)—segmentation of cyberspace into national jurisdictional spaces. In the wired world, Mueller reminds, this question is ultimately about “geopolitics, national power, and the future of global governance” (loc. 10).

*Will the Internet Fragment?* is comprised of six chapters including an introduction and conclusion. The logic of the book follows the four arguments Mueller outlines in the introductory chapter. First, communications globalization is overwhelmingly beneficial to humankind's socioeconomic development. Second, the perceived threats of technical fragmentation are overblown ("The Internet is not breaking apart" [loc 17]). Third, the multifaceted rhetoric of fragmentation obscures the single most dangerous kind of fragmentation—that of geographical sovereigns striving to "re-align control of communications with the jurisdictional boundaries of national states" (loc. 17). To escape terminological confusion and emphasize its supreme importance, Mueller proposes to altogether replace the term "fragmentation"—when one means potential division of cyberspace along national jurisdictions—with "alignment." Fourth, Mueller argues that we should move beyond state-centric thinking about the Internet and recognize cyberspace as its own polity and community.

Chapters 2 and 3 clarify discussions of fragmentation among Internet governance scholars and practitioners. Chapter 2, "A Taxonomy of 'Fragmentation,'" explains why the talk of the Internet's imminent fragmentation is moot from the technological standpoint. The more important discussion to be had, Mueller argues, is about "access restrictions that are *intentional*, and about *who* is making them *for whom*" (emphasis in original; loc. 23), for example, when an authoritarian state blocks critical oppositional or foreign news websites to stifle dissent. Chapter 3, "The Illusion of Technical Fragmentation," offers examples of temporary disruption in connectivity to illustrate the fact that these measures are never long-lasting and/or all-encompassing—and therefore technical fragmentation in any meaningful sense is impossible.

Chapters 4 and 5 are a detailed examination of alignment, the drive by nation-states to establish ultimate authority over respective national segments of cyberspace. In chapter 4, "Alignment: Cyberspace Meets Sovereignty," Mueller addresses some of the methods by which states introduce alignment (national securitization, territorialization of information flows, alignment of critical Internet resources) and its contradictions. Mueller concludes: "Alignment is both irresistible for states to attempt, and impossible for states fully to achieve. There is an inherent clash between alignment and the economic efficiencies and capabilities of digital technology" (loc. 61). Chapter 5, "Confronting Alignment," expands Muller's central idea by critiquing the three most common responses to alignment: to call for enhanced international legal cooperation among states, to "give up" and embrace national interest over global Internet, and to idealistically rely on "multistakeholderism," a governance model that attempts but rarely succeeds in bringing all relevant state and nonstate stakeholders as equals into the Internet governance policy making.

Finally, chapter 6, "Popular Sovereignty in Cyberspace," pivots from a descriptive narrative of the first five chapters—even if Mueller's normative stance is evident throughout—to an explicitly prescriptive agenda. Here, Mueller offers a solution to what he views as the veering of global communications, under pressure from national sovereigns, away from the Internet's original ideals of undisrupted borderless interaction. Mueller proposes to circumvent alignment by forging "net nationalism":

The real solution to alignment involves replacing national sovereignty over communications with a transnational popular sovereignty. This would require a

concerted change in popular awareness and identification—the construction of a new identity and polity. The political pressure it created would have to be strong enough to remove legitimacy and authority over critical aspects of Internet governance from established governments. It would be, in effect, a “national” liberation movement for a nonterritorial, transnational nation. (loc. 77)

Despite the pathos of national liberation, Mueller makes clear that net nationalism’s goal is not to displace nation-state institutions in their entirety, but only to reappropriate the management of global communications from the state and place it into the hands of the self-appointed group of Internet freedom enthusiasts. Mueller sees an embryo of the net nation in the “transnational community that identifies with the autonomy and freedom of the Internet [that] has grown up in the last 20 years” (loc. 80). This community, he proposes, consists of four overlapping groups. The first is a technical community of organizations and individuals that develop the software, standards, and applications for the digital environment. Second is “cosmopolitan advocacy NGOs” focusing on the protection of digital rights. The third group is Internet-based businesses, ranging from Netflix and Facebook to small local internet service providers—“Especially when these businesses are global or multinational in scope, they provide a counterweight to alignment and a commitment to global access, open markets, and interoperability” (loc. 80). The fourth group comprises those states and state-based organizations that “accept multistakeholder governance and/or economically and politically liberal policies” (loc. 80). This final group is surprising after five chapters of hard-line critique of the state as an actor in global communications governance.

Mueller is also unequivocal about who he does not want to see within the net nation and why: “Anti-capitalist movements within civil society will erode a business–civil society alliance and end up empowering territorial states and reinforcing alignment” (loc. 85). Mueller’s concern with the anticapitalist movements is somewhat puzzling, given how marginal their political powers are when juxtaposed with the world’s most influential digital corporations with billions of dollars and users.

While uncompromisingly critiquing state involvement in global communications governance, Mueller does not apply nearly the same scrutiny to the private sector. He portrays “Big Tech” as being at the front line in the fight for Internet freedom against the encroaching state. There is no doubt that many governments impose undue restrictions on communication, but Silicon Valley, especially firms that are global and multinational in scope, also has a notoriously mixed record on fair competition, user privacy, and freedom of expression. Various digital giants have been sued for anticompetitive practices, exposed for silencing their critics, linked to state surveillance, caught deliberately misleading the public about their practices, and plentifully criticized for lack of transparency. The very business model of digital platforms, which generates colossal profits for the few by deploying the user data and free labor of the many, exacerbates inequalities. Although not illegal, Silicon Valley spends vast sums on sponsoring Internet-related advocacy nonprofits and lobbying national legislators, thus contributing to blurring of the line between private and public interests. The soaring unchecked power of Big Tech is what should really concern anyone who cares about the future of the Internet as a democratic space (see, e.g., Scholz, 2012; Srnicek, 2016; Vaidhyanathan, 2011). Instead, net nationalism’s privileging of increasingly powerful digital behemoths carries the danger of moving the Internet and its governance not toward egalitarian popular sovereignty, but an emergent corporate digital Leviathan.

The ideologically exclusionary selection criteria of membership in the net nation are troubling. Evidently, only cosmopolitan, liberal, and procapitalist actors are viewed as worthy of managing global communications. In essence, Mueller's net nation replicates the current composition of the global Internet governance community, minus those forces, particularly nation-states, that do not subscribe to such ideals. The inescapable contradiction of drawing the group boundary where Mueller does lies in the fact that, as the author himself insists, the Internet has long become a truly global phenomenon that covers nations with all kinds of regimes and belief systems, including ideas about what the Internet should look like. It is unclear why illiberal regimes, as unattractive as many of them are, or anticapitalist socialist movements, which enjoy an upsurge in the West not seen in decades, should not have the right to participate in the governance of a domain that concerns all. This membership principle raises the question of whether the metaphors of reclaiming popular sovereignty and national liberation are appropriate in the case of net nationalism.

Mueller's scholarship rarely conceals his self-described "normative stance . . . rooted in the Internet's early promise of unfettered and borderless global communication" (Mueller, 2010, p. 5). In *Will the Internet Fragment?*, Mueller goes so far as to propose the creation of an entire transnational movement committed to global communications governance in the libertarian spirit of the early Internet. Although the prescriptive section of the book problematically omits the darker side of private powers within the Internet's political economy, *Will the Internet Fragment?* is an engaging, creative, and highly informed contribution to the blossoming field of Internet governance scholarship from one of its boldest minds. *Will the Internet Fragment?* at once clarifies much about Internet governance of today and provokes to think about what it should look like tomorrow—whether or not one shares Mueller's vision. Given how rapidly the domain of Internet governance is changing, hopefully Mueller's next volume is already in the works.

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