The Hard Work of the Hum:
Using ethnography to study power
& politics in the IETF

Dr. Corinne Cath
Minderoo Centre @ Cambridge
Critical Infra Lab @ Amsterdam Uni

Agenda

Introduction

Ethnography

Case Study

Next steps & Q&A

Introduction

Hello World:

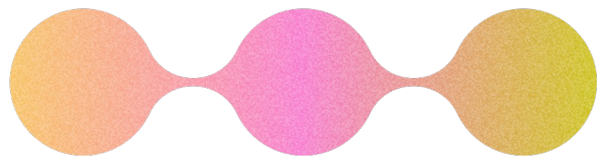Anthropologist of Internet Governance

Minderoo Centre for Tech & Democracy @ University of Cambridge

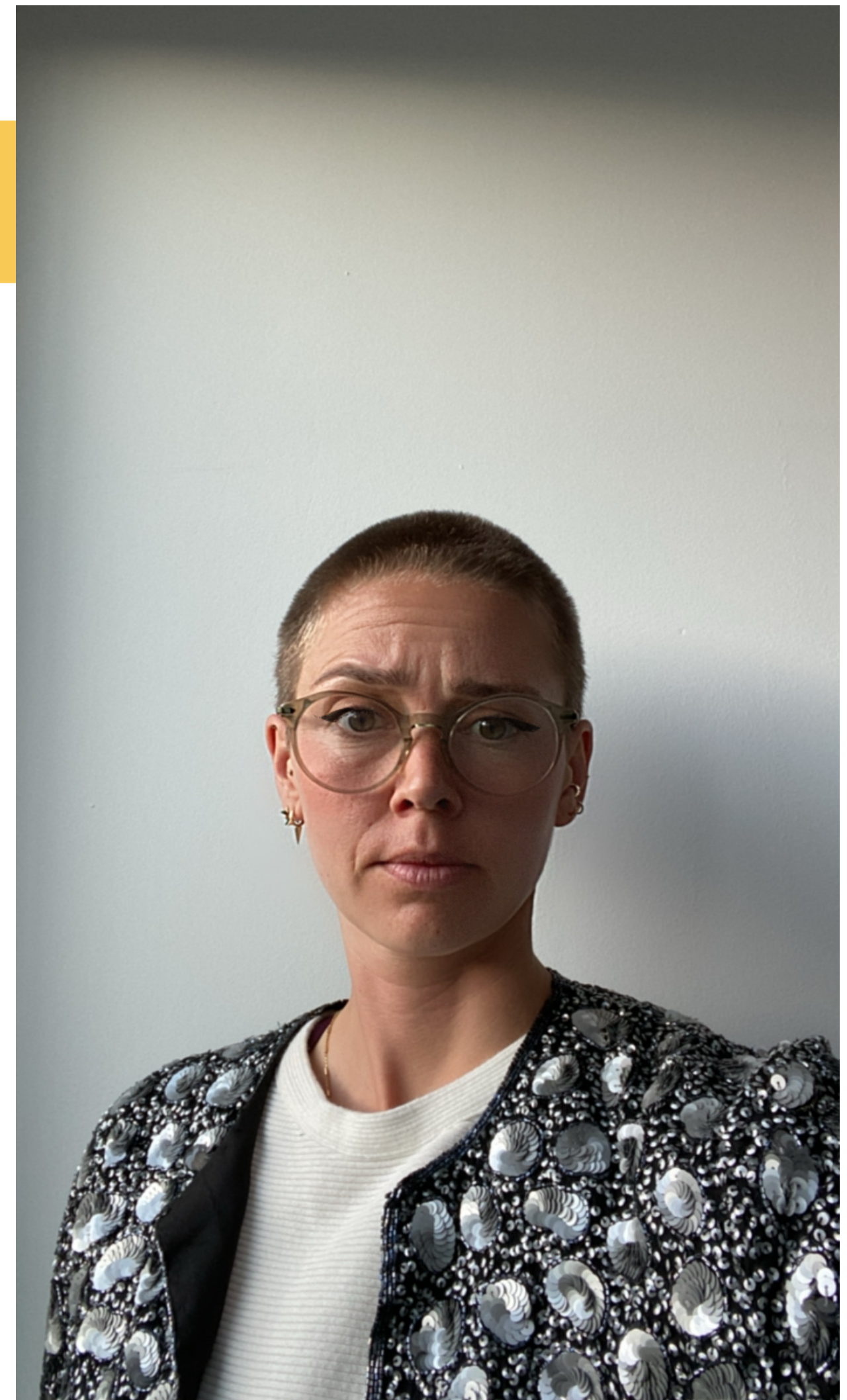Critical Infrastructure Lab @ University of Amsterdam

E: cc2162@cam.ac.uk

T: C__CS

W: corinnecath.com

Changing Minds and Machines:
A Case Study of Human Rights Advocacy in the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF)

Ph.D. about the IETF @ Oxford
Participating since 2015

Putting IETF culture into critical view – how standardization work in practice.

Found some discrepancies, that matter.

How suitable is the IETF to civil society participation?

IETF
Holy Cows

Ph.D. research

Openness, not closed governance

Individual participation, not org affiliation

Best technical solution, not political or economic

Humming, not voting

Right?

Wrong.....

Wrong.....

Wrong.....

Wrong.....

Wrong.....

Wrong.....

Cultural Dynamics	Exclusionary Effects
1. Denial of politics in technical discussions	Empowers corporations, disempowers civil society
2. Procedural openness as a distraction	Delegitimizes civil society critique of industry influence
3. Reliance on informal networking	Marginalizes minority voices through exclusion from social circles
4. Abrasive working practices	Enables sexism and racism to persist, hindering civil society

An IETF anthropologist

Am I lost?
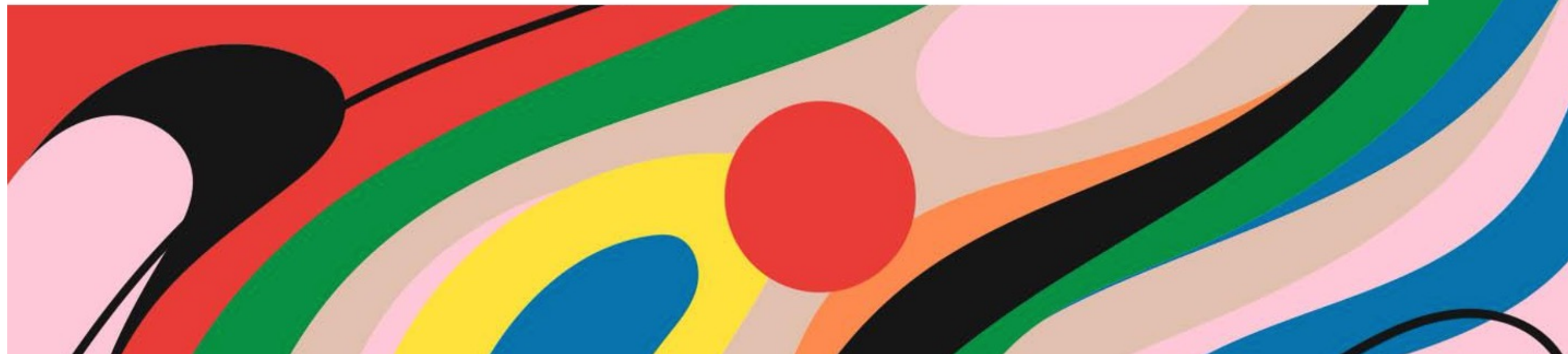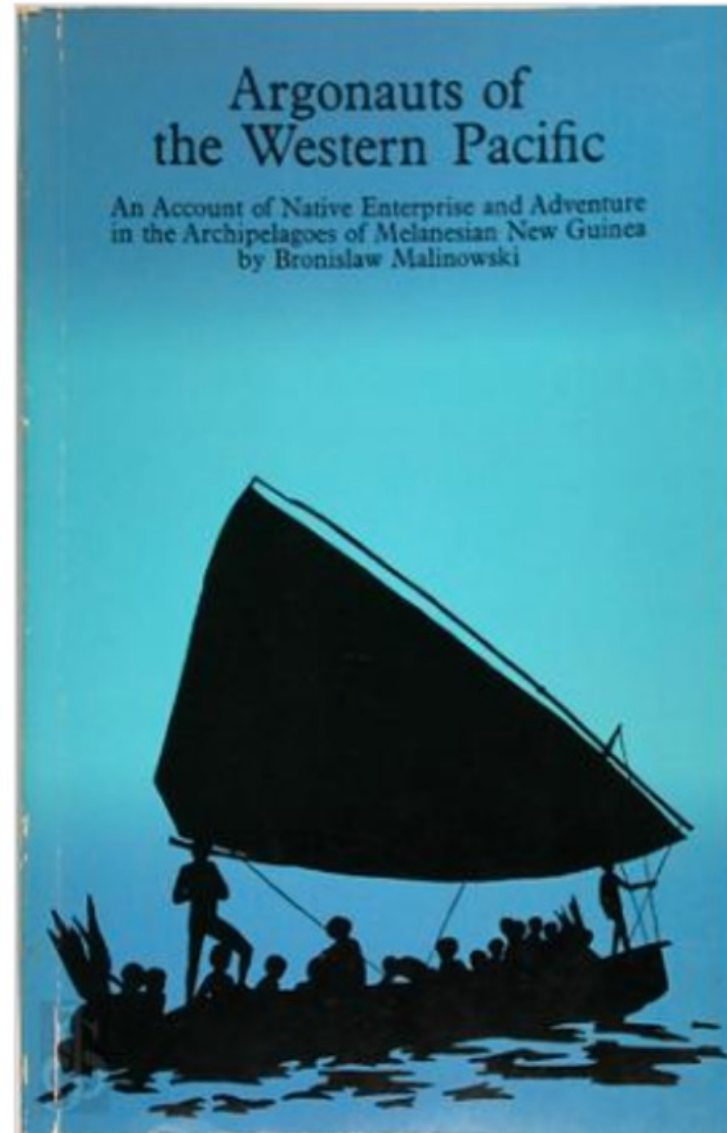
ABOUT US

Anthropologists are everywhere, we study "up" (i.e. powerful people) and "at home" (i.e. our own societies.

Ethnography

A Key Method for Research and Analysis of Standardization Processes (RASP RG)

What We Want To Study

The cultural conditions that shape society

| What | Study of human cultures and social behavior |

| How | Participant Observation, interviews |

| Why | Standardization is fundamentally human |
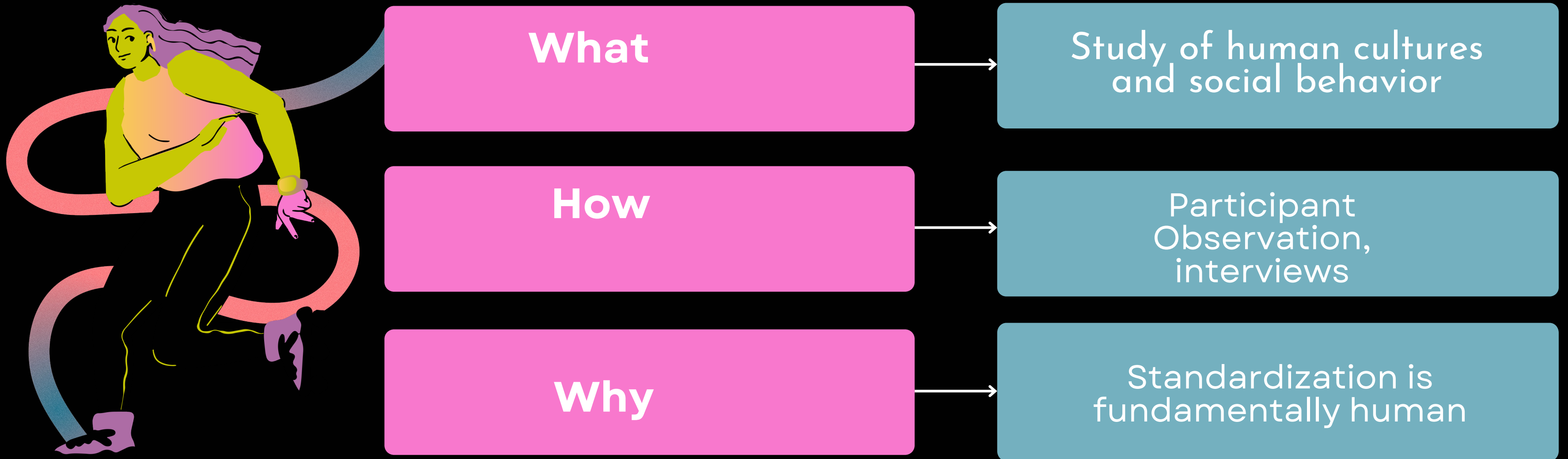
Case Study: Hard Work of the Hummm

The hum

As a relevant social ritual

What does it do?

What is the purpose of the hum?

What people say vs what they do

Who and what the hum protects

HMMMMMMMM

Humming, not voting

HMMMM on paper

The relative privacy of collective resonance

The hum

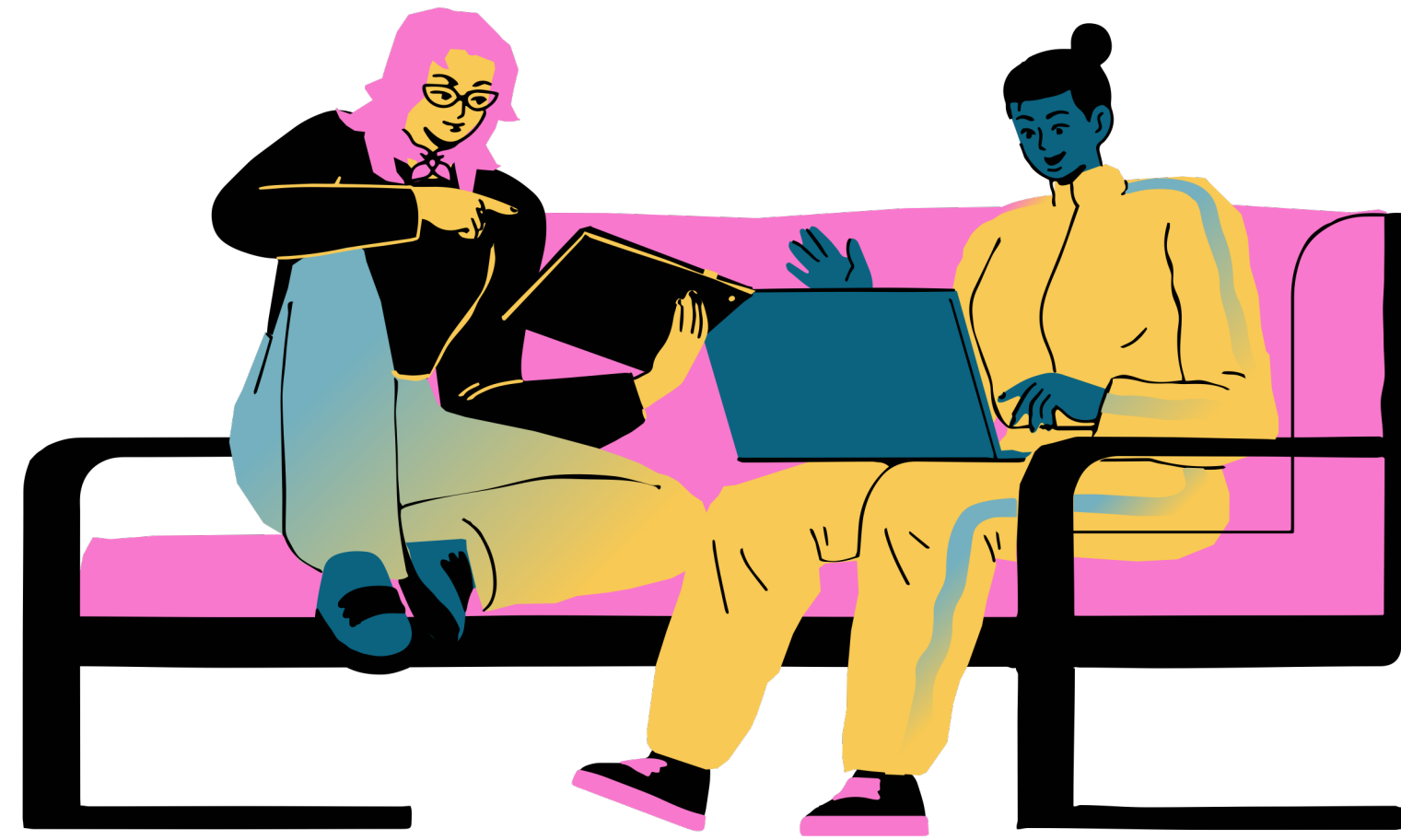Another aspect of Working Groups that confounds many people is the fact that there is no formal voting. The general rule on disputed topics is that the Working Group has to come to "rough consensus," meaning that a very large majority of those who care must agree, and that those in the minority have had a chance to explain why. Generally consensus is determined by *humming*: if you agree with a proposal, you hum when prompted by the chair. Most hum questions come in three parts: you hum to the first part if you agree with the proposal, to the second part if you disagree, or to the third part if you do not have enough information to make up your mind. Newcomers find it quite peculiar, but it works. It is up to the chair to decide when the Working Group has reached rough consensus; sometimes the responsible AD will also do so.

What does it do?

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Source: IETF Tao https://www.ietf.org/about/participate/tao/

HMMMMMMMMM

Viewing power through the hum:

Affiliation matters.

HMMM in fieldwork

What does it do?

Prevent majority rule, with some caveats?

https://www.rfc-editor.org/info/rfc7282

Or something else?

Ethnographic scrutiny of the hum

Hum-outcomes rarely a surprise
Not used as often (anymore)
Consensus often clear in advance
Doesn't work well in hybrid context
Does not prevent majority rule but..
Obfuscates power dynamics

HMMM in interviews

'It avoids the legal scrutiny in participation, it is just a bunch of engineers talking.'

Theorizing the HMMM

The hum

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What does it do?

When we put the hum in the IETF's power dynamics.

Paradoxically, the IETF's narrative of individual participation and the hum persists because its most powerful (industry) participants benefit from it.

HMMM ethnography

Thank you!

Rasp & Grasp Standardization Processes

Next steps
& Q&A