Project // Liberty

Enhancing Digital Governance

An Interview with Constance Bommelaer de Leusse, Executive Director, Project Liberty's McCourt Institute

EDITORS' NOTE *Constance de Leusse joined Project Liberty's McCourt Institute in November 2022 and serves as its Executive Director. She has more than 20 years of experience in digital policy and capacity building. She started her career working in the French prime minister's services on information society issues. She then joined the Internet Society, the international NGO founded by Vint Cerf, one of the fathers of the internet, as Vice President of Institutional Relations and Empowerment. She has been instrumental in developing new internet governance institutions, and founded the Internet Technical Advisory Committee to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), facilitating the participation of global technical and academic communities into international policy discussions. In 2013, she was seconded to UNESCO to help develop their internet governance strategy. She has served on a number of committees including the World Economic Forum Internet For All Steering Committee, and the UN Secretary-General's Multistakeholder Advisory Group of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF). On a part-time basis, she teaches digital governance at the university of Sciences Po. She also serves in the Naval Reserve of the French army. She holds a master's degree in law*

Constance de Leusse

from the Paris Panthéon Asass University, a post-graduate degree in EU politics from Sciences Po, and a diploma in management from the London School of Economics (LSE).

INSTITUTE BRIEF *The McCourt Institute (mccourtinstitute.org) was established in 2021 with a $75 million initial investment. The Institute aims to enhance digital governance by supporting timely, actionable research on ethical technology and serving as a meeting ground for technologists, social scientists, policymakers and governance experts, and leaders from the public and private sector. Together, these interdisciplinary partners are focused on creating a framework for online activity and growth that supports innovation and focuses on technology for the common good. Through the McCourt Institute, founding partners Sciences Po and Georgetown University will each receive grants of $25 million over 10 years to support the development of new scientific work conducted by their community of researchers. The Institute is a key component of Project Liberty (projectliberty.io), an international nonprofit working to transform how the internet works, create a more equitable digital economy, and develop a new civic architecture for the digital world.*

Will you provide an overview of the McCourt Institute?

I recently joined the McCourt Institute as Executive Director, and the McCourt Institute is a key part of Project Liberty. Project Liberty is a comprehensive international effort focusing on accelerating a movement for change and advancing a decentralized technology so that people can be in control of their data and have better agency online. The McCourt Institute brings the fundamental pillar of governance to this project. We are set up as an international institute with two foundational academic partners, Georgetown University in Washington, DC, and Sciences Po in Paris, and a growing network of collaborators. This transatlantic approach gives us the opportunity to be at the heart of academic and political ecosystems where the future of technical governance, but also policy, is being designed.

We have several goals at the McCourt Institute. One is to accelerate research in areas that are necessary to enable regulatory and technical environments to allow for ethical technology and good governance frameworks to flourish. We have a set of activities with our partner universities, including grants that we offer and programs that are impact-oriented. We want the findings of the research to be quickly translated into either technical solutions that are going to improve technology for better lives or influence the development of policy frameworks that will foster

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innovation for the common good and be enlightened by the rigorous contributions of the universities and practitioners that we are partnering with.

How critical are metrics to measure the impact of the McCourt Institute's work?

Metrics are very important in order to assess the benefits as well as the damages that we can acknowledge in the digital space. They are also very important in terms of measuring the positive impact of new technologies and policy frameworks. An example would be around social media's impact on mental health. We are actually developing a list of criteria to have indicators on whether or not things are improving in terms of social media and individuals' social media experience. This is very important because sometimes perception is different than reality. We want to be able to measure two things: trust in social media, and also verify if it correlates with actual benefits or challenges that people are experiencing on social media.

The fact that we have partnered with universities gives us an important advantage of coming into the conversation with rigorous data. We are looking to fund research which will help to connect the dots between our community of academics, students, and researchers with civil society leaders and industry leaders and policymakers. The Institute is a trusted platform where these key stakeholders can come in and have a genuine conversation and work together in designing the right kind of governance that

needs to be embedded in technology for tomorrow's policy framework.

I started my career working for the French government on these issues, and then I spent 16 years helping build an organization that was at the forefront of technical developments of the internet as well as the development of policy frameworks being developed. It is critical to find an impartial forum since, in my experience, I have found that sometimes when governments take the lead, they do not have the expertise on board to lead these conversations in an effective way, and when industry takes the lead, they may be seen as biased. This is where the McCourt Institute provides value since we are impartial. Our ambition is to create an environment to bring in the data from universities and have different stakeholder communities come together in a multi-stakeholder fashion to take the necessary steps for creating technology for the common good.

Do you feel that progress is being made with this effort?

I think the internet is still a teenager. I have been working on these issues for about 20 years, and a lot of progress has been made. I sense that there is a backlash when it comes to technology today. In the 1990s, there was hope and optimism around technology and how it was going to change how individuals and societies interacted in a better way, and some of this has happened. But, we also saw some of the difficulties and flaws.

I think that it is a healthy signal that there is a suspicion of technology, and that people are expressing that they have some level of discomfort in the way, for instance, that platforms are managed and the impact on their lives and on public opinion and on how democracies are functioning. This provides an opportunity for us to come into the conversation with solutions.

What excited you about the opportunity to lead the McCourt Institute and how valuable is your past experience for this new role?

When I left the French government, I surprised my entire family, since it was a great career. I felt at that time it was important to get closer to the technology, which is why I left and moved to Geneva and joined the Internet Society, founded by Vint Cerf, one of the fathers of the internet. I am in the same mindset today as I was 16 years ago when I joined the Internet Society because I am seeing the key elements that I saw at that time. I am seeing a comprehensive understanding that we will not be able to fix this if we do not harness the technology, the governance, and the policy piece. And, we need to involve civil society to create this movement. Project Liberty and its McCourt Institute are tackling one of the most pressing issues which I feel very strongly about, which is how technology is impacting society. The vision of Frank McCourt that there was something to do urgently on this front really resonated with me. ●