

Internet Governance Series: The IGF – the Least Worst Governance Option for Civil Society



According to habitués, you can't really make any claims about the IGF until you have attended at least three of them. Since I've only been to two, I apparently can't really comment. However I also met a few people who were regular attendants who were ambivalent about attending again. Some themes seem perpetual: the benefits of internet use are not equally distributed across the world or across lines of gender and class. A small number of people have a large influence on how decisions about the internet are made, and the discussions at the IGF, as flawed as they are, are still among the very few ways

for civil society actors to raise such issues.

In this sense the governance process, at least as represented by the Forum, is a play between means and ends. The ends are difficult to measure, as they are enacted not only by national regulation but by international agreements including treaties, as well as within standards, technical decisions about things like interoperability and net neutrality.

IGF as a language development process

We can not necessarily map the discussions that happen in the non-decision making environment of the Forum to these outcomes. But we might be able to look at the Forums as processes in themselves, particularly as processes of discourse production. This might be one of the ways of assessing how the Forums contribute to governance. Repeat participants explain that each year there are certain discourses that emerge, like this year's **evocation (and critique of) multi-stakeholderism**. According to Michael Gurstein, the **discourse of 'internet freedom'** introduced by Google and the very large US delegations dominated in 2012 but was totally absent in 2013 – perhaps unsurprisingly. So these Forums do provide an opportunity to introduce influential language, or to critique the dominant discourse.

Emerging issues: legitimacy, technical governance, internet of things

Besides the recurring discussions within the forum, I saw three other important issues emerging from the IGF. First, there is still a lot of uncertainty about whether the IGF process will extend past its current mandate ending in 2015. The question is whether there will be any long term model for maintaining broad participation in governance. There is some indication that the meeting proposed by the Brazilian government for April 2014 will involve civil society in addition to other actors, but this also places a burden on non-profit and advocacy organizations that need to plan and fundraise for an additional meeting each year.

Second, several discussions raised the issue of where governance is actually taking place: members of the 'technical community' reminded participants that governance decisions are made through standardization processes, some of which are discussed at the **IETF**, but others of which may be proprietary. In particular, none of the discussions at the IGF considered the problems of standardization and governance of mobile internet access, even though an increasing proportion of people access the internet via mobile devices. The artificial separation of the traditional 'wired' internet discussed at the IGF and the actual 'internet in practice' as experienced by billions of people seriously needs to be addressed.

Third, the development of the 'Internet of Things' or an expansion of networks to all kinds of objects, introduces some governance challenges that the IGF simply doesn't understand how to address. This process includes more networked devices embedded in, for example, **refrigerators**

and automobiles, and small sensors like the Fitbit, a wristband that measures vital signs, along with 'smart' electricity meters, air quality sensors all manner of other sensing technologies. Increasingly, these sensors are networked together making it possible to establish automatic responses to particular patterns of data appearing on the network. While many of these networks will operate using protocols already developed for the existing internet (which some IGF participants suggested meant that the Internet of Things was not worth discussion) other governance problems emerge. For example, how will interoperability operate? How will privacy be protected? Will such Internet of Things networks be accessible to the people who use them, or will they be locked and managed from the top down? Despite some resistance, a Dynamic Coalition on the Internet of Things has now been proposed, so at least it will be possible to discuss these emerging issues in the next two years.

Spaces of Governance

Governance takes place in many spaces, and arguably also takes place on many technical levels. Across all of these, there aren't very many opportunities for citizen participation, which is one reason why instances of public outcry like the opposition to SOPA and ACTA garnered so much attention. The IGF promises to be one of the few places that such citizen participation can be formally recorded. I am not sure that it should continue to be the only one, but if we observe carefully the way that oppositional discourses are created at the Forum, we might be able to call it the least worst option for citizen participation in governance.

This article gives the views of the author, and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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