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Configurations, Collaborations, and Conflicts: International Organizations and Post-WSIS Internet Governance

*Paper Prepared for the 2016 ECPR Regulatory Governance Conference
Tilburg, The Netherlands
(Short Summary)*

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Introduction

Scholarly work on internet governance (see, for example, Brousseau, et. al., 2012 or DeNardis, 2014) has grown significantly in the last fifteen years. Concomitant with this growth has come an increase in disciplinary backgrounds and approaches. Today scholars from anthropology, business, communications, computer sciences, economics, geography, history, international relations, law, political science, public administration, sociology and other disciplines examine various aspects of the very complex internet governance ecosystem (as we have elsewhere termed it (Levinson and Marzouki, 2015)). The internet governance ecosystem refers to the diverse organizations and institutions and their specific environmental settings or contexts as well as to the information and resource flow patterns within and among such entities. Indeed many scholars have also come to use multi-disciplinary approaches to capture best the rich, vibrant and ever-changing arena that is called internet governance today.

This paper stems from a three-year joint research project highlighting a previously understudied portion of the internet governance ecosystem, that of international organizations and the myriad actors engaged in internet governance during the last fifteen years. We are particularly interested here in the time period that is marked on one end by the World Summit on the Information Society, held during the two years, 2003 and 2005; and on the other by the post WSIS events at the United Nations culminating in the December 2015 Outcomes Document including its section on Internet governance. Following a discussion of methods, the paper is organized into three sections that stem from our findings. Each section highlights one of these three interrelated themes. They are: Changing Models of International Organizations; Changing Models of Internet Governance; and Changing Models of Collaboration and Conflict.

Overview and Methods

Focusing on the understudied arena of international organizations and internet governance, our project on which this paper is based uses multiple methods: Interviews with those individuals primarily in three select international organizations who are charged with Internet related policy functions are primary

data sources along with participant observation of key internet-governance related events that include international organizations in at least one dimension of the activity whether as an organizer, co-organizer, presenter, discussant or speaker. Additionally, content analysis of documents and archival analysis amplifies and provides a foundation for interview and observation findings.

With regard to conceptual frameworks, we use concepts from sociology, political science, international relations and communications. This multidisciplinary approach aids in capturing and analyzing the vibrant, complex, and ever-moving internet governance ecosystem, as we term it. We are particularly interested in the flow and outputs of information/ideas and other resources as they relate to internet governance across interorganizational boundaries within the internet governance ecosystem. Using a case study approach, we focus our work primarily in relation to the international organizations studied and one institutional innovation (inaugurated in Athens in 2006), the Internet Governance Forum (IGF).

The idea for this institutional innovation stems from The Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG) of the World Summit On the Information Society (WSIS). The WGIG itself was a multistakeholder entity that was crafted to solve internet policy-related issues/idea conflicts raised at WSIS in 2003. Nitin Desai chaired the WGIG and Markus Kummer was its executive coordinator. (Note that Desai had served as the Deputy Secretary General for the Rio Earth Summit in 1992.) The IGF, then, was designed by WGIG and became a part of the Tunis Agenda, the outcome document of the WSIS in 2005. It was to be a multistakeholder entity that would not, by design, be a decision-making body. Rather it would be the locus for multistakeholder dialogue. The IGF today is now in its eleventh year and will meet in Mexico in December 2016; it remains a subject of both collaboration and conflict as will be examined later in this paper. In December 2015 The United Nations General Assembly as a part of its WSIS+10 review, extended the IGF's mandate for an additional ten years. Note also that in recent years, there has been a growth in national and regional Internet Governance Forums that, then, feed into the IGF and its processes.

Changing Models of International Organizations

In their early days, international organizations (IOs) were seen as entities with the primary role of coordinating across member states. This role was especially important in contexts of conflicting ideas and/or scientific or technical uncertainties/complexities. The internet governance policy arena is a perfect match for such a definition: different nation states have differing views on a range of policy issues related to the internet; additionally, internet policy issues contain technologically complex and changing elements. Similar to environmental policy issues and their technological complexity/uncertainties, internet policy issues complement the venue of international organizations writ large and indeed the embedded turf of several different and possibly competing international organizations.

Recent scholars of international organizations (Weiss et. al., 2009; Abbott and Snidal, 2010; Schemeil, 2013) highlight a trend that we also see from the data collected for this project: the subtle transformation from organizations that merely coordinate across member states to active players in their own right. Tallberg, Sommerer, Squatrito and Lundgren (p. 1058, 2016) point out in their very recent studies of IOS (but not focused on internet governance) that “unless IOs develop policy aimed at solving the transnational problems societies confront, they will fail to generate public support and be of limited value in combatting....challenges”. Focusing within individual IOs but again not specifically on internet governance policies, Eckhard and Ege (2016) underline the roles of the secretariat in the IOs they study. They find secretariats play a role in influencing policy in a normative manner during policy formation and also in a technical manner during policy implementation. Contexts again play important roles.

Much of the IO literature examines access to IOs or roles of secretariats but few studies actually highlight the transformational nature and potential of IOs. Schemeil (2013) reminds us that IOs have various strategies for remaining relevant and even for redefining their own roles over time. Overlaying this finding with the dynamic internet governance ecosystem over the ten-year plus timespan we find that the international organizations we studied have, indeed, transformed themselves in order to maintain their visibility, relevance and power over time. They have done this not only by reshaping or adding activities or tasks but also by transforming their organizational locus and even reshaping ever so subtly their overall missions.

Changing Models of Internet Governance

In the earliest days of internet governance, the model was purely nation-state rooted. Governing the internet was seen as a nation state policy space. Interestingly, when the U.S. Department of Commerce took over the internet governance policy space from the U.S. Department of Defense, it opened up the call for comments in its white paper to input from other nations, realizing perhaps even in an inchoate fashion, the tremendous global potential for the internet as it would develop. Yet even then, the policy space was a nation –state rooted policy space.

It was not until the United Nations-sponsored WSIS 2003-2005 that open, cross-national discussion, involving a limited range of stakeholders, about how to develop policy concerning the internet and the information society ensued. (Note that the technical arena of internet governance has a different model not discussed here.) Even at WSIS, nation state viewpoints dominated discussions; the then culture of international organizations with their member states power and purview also shaped the WSIS proceedings. Yet the WGIG (Working Group on Internet Governance), itself a multistakeholder group, provided a foundation for future multistakeholder inclusion and, most importantly, for the growth of the term ‘multistakeholder’. The very design of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) spawned by the WGIG and confirmed by the second WSIS Summit helped to

institutionalize or regularize (although not universally accepted) the use of the term 'multistakeholder' for approaches and involvement in the internet governance ecosystem. Additionally, tracking the increase in the use of the word 'multistakeholder' illustrates some cross-organizational learning. (There are still governments and organizations that argue (for various reasons) for a multilateral or government to government policy space regarding internet governance.¹)

What emerges here from our data is three key elements with regard to IOs: how IOs learned to adopt the term multistakeholder, how they learned across differing policy spaces and also how they utilize this term over time to re-envision and reinvigorate their own missions, practices and performance. An example here is the use and institutionalization over time of the word 'multistakeholder' in the internet governance ecosystem. Nitin Desai, who chaired the WSIS WGIG and who had previous leadership service in the UN with a focus on global environmental governance wherein the term multistakeholder originally appeared in UN proceedings, used that term again in the context of his 2006+ leadership of the IGF and the term also took hold in much of the growing internet governance ecosystem (Levinson, 2012).

Changing Models of Collaboration and Conflict

The original conception of international organizations, as noted earlier, with its focus on coordination among member states, highlights the cross-government space for both collaboration and conflict with IOs as players fostering collaboration in the face of conflict. This model has not disappeared and IOs with their secretariats still do play this role or, at the very least, give lip service to this role. Yet amidst changing contexts, increasing uncertainties both technical and geopolitical, and growing usage of the term as well as presence of 'multistakeholders', IOs have actively reshaped their roles in promulgating ideas of multistakeholder participation in the internet governance ecosystem as well as reshaping models of collaboration and conflict through informal and formal linkages to other stakeholder groups, defining research agendas, fostering 'dialogue', and even hosting conferences. Collaboration can be simply the process of working together or it can involve institutional arrangements (Sowa, 2008).

Collaborations do not emerge from thin air. Rather they are composed of entities that have knowledge of one another, whether formal or informal or a mixture (Spekkink and Boons, 2015). Indeed there needs to be a foundation or collaborative capacity as Spekkink and Boons term it before formal collaboration processes take off. While they limit their work to collaborations in the Netherlands, they also find that trust, mutual understanding and commitment emerge over time as the collaborations they studied unfold. IOs, then, are playing roles in bringing unlike actors together over time and thus, in the internet governance arena, craft new contexts (and new ideas) for collaboration and conflict.

The marine aquaculture ecosystem provides a similar example of new knowledge acquisition through collaborations, Leach et. al. (2014) in surveying 121 participants in 10 partnerships in the U.S., finds that acquiring knowledge is larger when there is uncertain science and when stakeholders have lower technical knowledge. Moving from knowledge acquisition to actual value or belief change, they find that new knowledge garnered through collaboration primes partners to be open to and change their opinions on scientific or policy issues. He calls this 'deep learning (p.591) in a collaboration. Thus, diversity of participants in a collaboration or 'multistakeholderism' appears to have the potential for amplifying learning.

Conclusion

Our data focusing on international organizations and the internet governance ecosystem complement Leach's findings from the environmental policy arena. The IOs in our study saw themselves as key catalyzers for interorganizational learning, all the while strengthening their power, reshaping their missions and relevance in an ever changing, technologically, and politically complex world.

The findings of our study also highlight the interactions among the three themes discussed in this paper: transformation in models of international organizations intersects with the transformation in models of internet governance and also with the transformation in models of collaboration and conflict. Indeed, from the perspective of those we studied within international organizations and, in particular, within their secretariats, international organizations actually instigate the flow of new ideas that promulgate and institutionalize or regularize such models.ⁱⁱ Interacting with the internet governance ecosystem over the fifteen + years from WSIS until 2016 has enable international organizations themselves to move from periphery (merely coordinating across nation-states) to core as well as to move internet governance issues to more central locations within their IOs.

Much more work needs to be done on these topics, especially on changing models of collaboration and conflict with a view toward the institutionalization of a multistakeholder approach in internet governance and, comparatively, across global governance domains.

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ⁱ In June 2016 the United Nations issued a list of participants selected for its “Retreat On Advancing The 10-year Mandate of the Internet Governance Forum”. Next to each name in its list is a category entitled affiliation/stakeholder group, in addition to the categories of government, technical community, civil society and private sector, it also includes that of International (such as WIPO or ITU) and of Intergovernmental (such as the category next to Lee Hibbard of the COE).

ⁱⁱ Examples from our data include UNESCO and its commissioning surveys and reports as well as COE and its, for example, recent call for expressions of interest for developing policy guidance on children and the digital environment.