

Digital Divide in Global Internet Governance: The “Access” Issue Area

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Abstract

Digital divide has been routinely defined in terms of the disparities in access to the Internet for populations in the affluent West and the impoverished South. In this paper, it is proposed that the global “digital divide” reappears at the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), where differing agendas and interpretations of what constitutes “access” to the Internet divide the participants. As a result, the opportunity for the participants to share expertise about the technological, legal, economic, and policy issues of Internet Governance is reduced. The “access” discussion area is a representative case of the diversity of stakeholder notions on: what constitutes the governance aspects in that area, which the levels of responsibility and generating solutions are, and which the priority issues are to be included in the IGF agenda. The applied critical discourse analysis reveals some important dynamics, which pertain to strategic definitions, identifying concerns, sharing “best practices”, imposing expert opinions, and adopting the dominant vocabulary and discourse strategies. After a brief overview of the developments in the field of global Internet governance, theoretical insights are presented from the interorganizational and management studies (theory of multistakeholder collaboration), and political philosophy and international studies (Foucault’s interpretation of power and governmentality).

Keywords: Digital divide, Internet Governance Forum, Access to the Internet, Theory of Multistakeholder Collaboration

Introduction

Internet Governance (IG) is a newly consolidated regulatory domain at the global level. The rapid diffusion of the Internet to every aspect of our lives, and to any corner of the world (although in incomparably different magnitudes), put a number of urgent issues on the map of international communications.

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Governments and intergovernmental organizations responded by experimenting with a novel approach - global multistakeholder (MSH) collaboration, which has been mastered in the last thirteen years.

The potential for inclusion and equality that the MSH process holds prompted the closer examination, in this study, of the innovative process conducted at two global Internet governance venues – the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) and the Internet Governance Forum (IGF). The analysis is based on the assumption that multistakeholder collaboration is characterized by power dynamics, which can be detected in stakeholder discursive strategies. By analyzing those strategies, one could both reveal perceived stakes and preview potential outcomes. For this study, IGF discussions in a particular issue area are analyzed, namely that of “access” to the Internet. The focus is on the discursive strategies that different stakeholders apply to define the issue area and to impact on understandings about policy solutions.

This paper begins with a brief overview of the developments in the field of global Internet governance and the attempts to conceptualize them. Theoretical insights are further presented, which are generated from exploration of MSH collaborations in Interorganizational and Management studies, and from Foucault's interpretations of power and governmentality. This allows for a power-centered analysis of the case of “access” discussions at the IGF.

The “access” discussion is selected as a representative case of the diversity of stakeholder notions on: what constitutes the governance aspects in that area, which the levels of responsibility and generating solutions are, and which the priority issues are to be included in the IGF agenda. The applied critical discourse analysis reveals a number of important dynamics, which pertain to strategic definitions, identifying concerns, sharing “best practices”, imposing expert opinions, and adopting the dominant vocabulary and discourse strategies.

The overall conclusion is that the global “digital divide” reappears at the IGF setting, where differing interpretations and agendas deprive the participants, at a certain degree, from sharing expertise about the technological, legal, economic, and policy issues of Internet Governance.

What is Internet Governance?

With the commercialization of the Internet in early 1990s, how to govern cyberspace acquired paramount significance. Such issues as protecting privacy and guaranteeing the security of transactions gained priority in the agenda of the international trade relations. The broader public debate in the United States at the time was focused on the National Information Infrastructure (NII) project, and was conducted by the mainstream media along business, and not public policy lines.²

At the time, the public debate on Internet regulability focused on the level of governmental intervention in “taming” the new medium, based on the experience with the broadcasting and telecommunications governance, and the alleged “unruliness” of the distributed global network. By the time the U.S. Administration began soliciting input on the Internet DNS management policy (1997), at least four principal competing views had emerged on the regulability of the new global medium: 1/ pro-government-involvement; 2/ libertarian view of independence of cyberspace; 3/ Lessig’s “code is the law” view (1999), spelling out the myth of the ungovernable Internet; and 4/ “self regulation” with stakeholder involvement (see Author, 2008, 25-31).

In this highly energized and ideologically charged discursive environment, the experiment with a hybrid institutional format was seen by many as holding the key to the Internet regulatory regime, which would impact on the evolvement of the Net as a global public utility. The U.S. government’s policy of privatizing the Internet DNS management was conceived amidst this public discourse of limited governmental role in view of the original self-regulative regime of the medium. ICANN was launched in 1998 as an experiment in multistakeholder policy intervention, at the historic period of transforming the global digital network from a communicative to a commercial medium. This policy intervention was called upon to settle competing values over the flow of information on the network.

² As the communications scholar Robert McChesney cautioned, “[t]he historical record of communication regulation indicates that... once the needs of corporations are given primacy, the public interest will invariably be pushed to the margins”. He concluded that “the debate over communications policy is restricted to elites and those with serious financial stakes in the outcome. It does not reflect well on the caliber of U.S. participatory democracy” (McChesney, Robert. 1996. “The Internet and U.S. Communication Policy-making in Historical and Critical Perspective”. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* [On-line], 1 (4); 103–104); <http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol1/issue4/mcchesney.html>)

In the ICANN's formative years, the competing views in this discourse influenced the range of academic reflections on the newly established private corporation for the management of the DNS. While the experimental multistakeholder collaborative model for policymaking in ICANN was almost universally acclaimed, its implementation was subjected to persistent criticism, because it was perceived as being curtailed by those stakeholders who enjoyed structural supremacy and influence over the process (see Mueller, 2002; Kleinwachter, 2000; 2003; Johnson, Post, and Crawford, 2003; Johnson and Crawford, 2000; Froomkin, 2002 a,b; 2003).

The experiment began with the construction of ICANN as a private authority to manage the Internet address space. This radical version of governing a global commons shocked the diplomatic world. The residual tensions of this shock can still be observed in the IGF debate. The real magnitude of the governmental opposition to the experiment, though, was felt particularly strongly four years later, in two processes that were unfolding almost simultaneously. In ICANN, a reform was induced in 2002 to accommodate the governments' requirements for substituting a public-private policymaking mechanism for the "private" one. This transpired in opening the ICANN Board for the representatives of the Governmental Advisory Committee (GAC), in switching from open MSH working groups to task forces, which are easier to manage, and in establishing „public consultation" as the policymaking process instead of the MSH collaboration on accumulating alternative decisions.

The next year, 2003, the UN International Telecommunications Union (ITU) convened the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), which provided the developing countries' governments with the opportunity to reclaim their power under the UN „one government, one vote" rule, while allowing stakeholders who were unsatisfied with the U.S. unilateral political oversight of ICANN to put the Internet domain name regulation at the center of the debate. Aside from the heated political power contestations, this debate, as contained by the WSIS Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG), produced the first map of global IG as a regulatory domain, stabilized the realized SH interdependencies, and registered a global consensus on continuing the experiment in global multistakeholderism in IG via the Internet Governance Forum (IGF).

The creation of the IGF, in Athens, 2006, as a multistakeholder discussion process on key public policy issue areas related to the Internet was followed by six more annual forums in Rio de Janeiro, 2007, Hyderabad, India, 2008, Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, 2009, Vilnius, Lithuania, 2010, and Nairobi, Kenya, 2011.

It should be noted here that ICANN and IGF, which are the two principal venues in global IG today, differ in mandate and in produced outcomes. Thus, ICANN was set to manage the Internet address space, which is perceived as a “critical global resource”, in public interest. On its part, IGF was conceived in the broad “Information Society building” framework as a forum for coordinating understandings and policy approaches, but it does not have any policymaking mandate.

In this study, though, the focus is on the analytical similarity between the two global forums as *multistakeholder collaborative assemblies*. One of the outcomes of the WSIS was the proclaimed consensus on the value and desirability of the MSH collaboration for evolving common approaches to governing the Internet. ICANN was the “test tube” for the innovative approach. The “lessons learned” from ICANN were applied to IGF by the representatives of the same constituencies – governments, international organizations, Internet developers and managers, and business and individual user communities. In that regard, IGF practices an improved version of global multistakeholderism because of having knowledge of the ICANN’s errors and faults. For analytical purposes, in this study, the comparison between the two formations extends only as far as the process of continuity in experimenting with stakeholder collaboration, while all other differences in mandate and outcomes are recognized and acknowledged.

Competing Definitions of Internet Governance

The actors involved in the Internet governance debate have struggled to define the field. The initial narrow understanding of IG as linked solely to managing the Internet DNS, and the related trademark controversies, was overcome during the WSIS, where the Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG) produced a functional definition focused on the emerging “shared principles, norms, rules, decision-making procedures, and programmes that shape the evolution and use of the internet” (see WGIG, 2005).

In a review of the IG field, Milton Mueller (2010), a prominent scholar in the IG field, cautioned that “any attempt to stretch the term internet governance to include things like the construction of physical telecommunications infrastructure, spectrum management, open standards, e-government and the like is simply based on an uncritical and unhelpful attempt to conflate all forms of information and communication technology governance with the internet”. He proposes the following definition: internet governance is the “*collective action by governments, civil society and/or the private sector operators of the networks and services connected by the internet, to establish global agreements about the standards, policies, and rules of conduct governing communications that rely on the TCP/IP protocols*”(emphasis in the original). And further Mueller explained that Internet governance should include “only those technical, legal, regulatory, and policy problems that arise as a direct consequence of the involved parties’ mutual use of the internet protocols to communicate”.

As the case of “access”, discussed further in this study, confirms, at this particular point, there is a large stakeholder constituency, which does not favor such a definition. Representatives of developing countries governments, NGOs, and service providers perceive the limited-focus definition as reducing the current list of concerns at the IGF to only those that are important to the developed countries participants. Instead, they have insisted on framing Internet governance as a global development-policies subfield of the UN Information Society Building agenda.

For the scholars who have closely observed the developments in that arena of International Communications, it is clear that, despite the principle of equality in multistakeholder collaboration, some deeply rooted divisions produce competing views on the scope and substance of the open debates.

What is “Multistakeholderism?”

Multistakeholder collaboration is, indeed, a novelty in the field of global communications. Yet, since 1980s, scholars in Interorganizational and Management studies have conceptualized collaboration as a public policy approach that provides a viable democratic alternative to deal with *complex issues* (emphasis added; see Huxham, 1996).

To respond to the need for a more dynamic process-oriented mode of investigation in interorganizational relations, Barbara Gray (1989) developed an empirical theory of collaboration, which combined perspectives of organizational behavior and political science.

As a first step in this direction, Gray suggested that collaboration was enabling organizations to manage their increasing interconnectedness (226). As quasi-institutional mechanisms, collaborations serve to accommodate differing interests within society and coordinate interorganizational relations. C. Finn (1996) concurs that collaboration is perceived in Organization Studies as a “fundamentally new public policy approach to understanding and dealing with *issues that are larger than the capacity of any one actor or organization is able... to comprehend or deal with*” (emphasis added; 152).

In a collaboration, stakeholders constructively explore their differences. The aim is to create a richer, more comprehensive appreciation (common understanding) of the problem than any one of them could construct alone, and resolve conflicts, or advance shared visions on the collective good. The expectation that through collaborative efforts some positive outcomes would be produced is a powerful incentive for participation in a collaboration.

Gray proposed that collaborations should be studied in terms of: 1/ what has induced a collaboration – a conflict or a shared vision concerning a domain; 2/ what the intended outcome is – information exchange or producing binding agreements; 3/ whether an institutionalized arena, within which discussions can be initiated, is available, or not, and 4/ how strong the convening power is, to get the parties to the table and to guarantee the success of the implementation phase (56).

When applied to the global Internet governance forums, those study dimensions suggest that ICANN belongs to the conflict-resolution motivated initiatives, while the creation of IGF was motivated by “advancing a shared vision” in the UN framework of building Information Society. Indeed, in the mid-1990s, MSH collaboration in ICANN was seen as the governance solution to the conflicts on allocating property rights in cyberspace. The corporation was expected to produce the regulatory regime for the domain.

The convener – the U.S. Department of Commerce (DoC) – was powerful enough to assemble a globally-representative collaboration and control its dynamics (timetable, agenda, structuring) without officially participating in the discussions.

As for the the IGF, the forum was the ITU's, a UN intergovernmental agency, response to the unilateral U.S. government's control over the management of the Internet DNS. The expectation was to create a counter-balancing forum for exchange of information and consensus building, in the absence of pressure to produce policies or recommendations by consensus, but where the world governments would participate in shaping views and directions about global IG. The legitimacy of the forum depends on the diversity of stakeholder groups represented there.

The theory of collaboration suggests, as well, that a successful collaboration undergoes three major phases (see Gray, 1989). At the *problem-setting stage*, a collection of stakeholders is convened, which includes those whose expertise is essential to construct as complete an understanding of the problem as possible, and those stakeholders who will be responsible for implementing a decision. In their first meetings, stakeholders recognize and acknowledge their interdependences.

As the forerunner of global multistakeholderism in IG, ICANN had experienced the significance of these preliminary dynamics. The U.S. government, in its capacity as the convener of the collaboration on the Internet DNS management privatization, initiated public hearings in the spring of 1997.

The accumulated information allowed for the identification of the potential stakeholders and their principal positions on different issues, the appreciation of the complexity of the domain (in technical, economic, and interdependency terms), and the amassing of a constitutive agenda of policy issues. The publication of the U.S. DoC Green Paper (January 1998) and, consequently, White Paper (June 1998) on this privatization policy motivated stakeholders to participate in the collaborative process, through the Internet Forum for the White Paper (IFWP). The goal was to create a global private corporation with regulative power in the domain.

Although playing a discrete role in selecting stakeholders in this early stage, the DoC instructed the well-organized constituencies - trademark owners and technical experts - to include at-large Internet users in the collaboration.

Because the technical cadre perceived itself as the public interest guardian in a trusteeship organization, it vigorously opposed the at-large participation on an equal basis. Ultimately, the representative power of the at-large users was curtailed.

At the *direction-setting stage*, participants work on organizational and substantive policy issues (establishing ground rules, setting agenda, organizing subgroups, jointly finding facts, exploring options, and reaching agreement and closing the deal). This is the stage where values are articulated, interests are identified and juxtaposed, and a sense of common purpose or direction emerges. In effect, the intangible outcomes of a MSH assembly – consensus, learning, and innovation, as identified by authors in Interorganizational Studies (see Turcotte and Pasquero, 2001), are produced during this stage of the collaborative efforts.

In IGF, in open discussions on “access”, for instance, the participants have become aware of the broad spectrum of challenges that are pertinent to users in different geographic regions. While representatives of developing countries focus on basic infrastructure problems, such as creating national broadband plans and attracting private investment, voices from Western countries advocate framing the “access to Internet” as a human-right issue. The effect is an accelerating process of learning about diverse experiences. This facilitates the search for effective technological, policy, and business solutions. Learning how others have dealt with Internet access challenges translates later into innovative local initiatives.

At the *implementation stage*, those organizations that have been created to oversee the implementation of negotiated agreements serve as systems for self-regulation in the domain, a long-term structure to support and sustain the stakeholders’ collective appreciation, a forum for future problem solving, and a regulative framework for the domain.

As a result, “collaboration” can be defined exclusively as a *self-governance process*: “Collaboration occurs when a group of *autonomous stakeholders* of a problem domain engage in an interactive process, using shared rules, norms and structures, to act or decide on issues related to that domain” (emphasis added; Wood and Gray, 1991, 146).

Power Dynamics and Outcomes: “Lessons Learned” from ICANN

Collaboration is legitimized through broad *inclusiveness*. Nonetheless, as a strategy for managing interdependencies, collaboration evokes *political dynamics* - stakeholders are anxious to advance their own interests. The resulting tensions are contained by the ‘shared power’ mode of operation that is accepted by all participants. Still, in the *problem setting stage*, power dynamics are conditioned by those who define the nature of the problem - the conveners, for they decide how to address it, what actions will be taken to solve it, and even who will participate and what the forum in which the deliberations will occur will be. During the *direction-setting phase*, power dynamics emanate from control over both defining an agenda for the domain and determining the range of mutually acceptable solutions (“power to strategize”).

As it is discussed further in the article, power dynamics are observable in the IGF debate on “access” to the Internet. How the issue’s scope is defined has become a point where conflicting ideologies collide. At the 2010 IGF, for instance, the organizers of “Access and Diversity” session structured the panel discussion around issues of content/language diversity and internationalized domain names (IDNs) adoption, to the exclusion of infrastructure and international data traffic cost problems. Previous IGF discussions had demonstrated, though, that the latter are issues of relevance to the developing countries representatives. According to scholars in Organization Studies, the value of MSH collaborative process is in producing such *intangible outcomes* as *consensus, learning and innovation*, along with programs, regulative decisions or regimes (tangible outcomes) (see Turcotte and Pasquero, 2001; Huxham and Vagen, 2000; Inness and Booher, 1999; Pasquero, 1991). Collaboration induces new structural relationships among a multitude of players, while it stabilizes existing force relationships or engenders a network of new dependencies in a particular domain.

Previously conducted examination of the ICANN process by the author (see Author, 2010) suggests that certain lasting outcomes were produced in the formative years (1998-2002). They pertain to: a/ the creation of a regulatory regime and the structuring of a problem domain (the DNS management), b/ the diffusion of norms and values, characteristic of the North American Internet technical community, to broader societal layers (i.e. non-proprietary protocols; meritocratic, open-access participation), and c/ the broadening of the global network of stakeholders in the Internet development (i.e. the regional at-large organizations in ICANN 2.0 since 2002).

These observations are important for the global IG domain as a whole, because ICANN has been recognized as *the* principal reference point in the current debate. The WGIG Background Report (June 2005) noted that “ICANN has developed a model for involving groups of stakeholders in a meaningful way by grouping them into separately organized constituencies... This model might well prove effective in other organizations as well” (58).

Along with the organizational model, ICANN provided the *normative framework* for the collaborative process in the WGIG, and, currently, at the IGF: to be “open and inclusive”, to conduct a transparent deliberative online process, to webcast the sessions, and to enable remote participation. In sum, the “lessons learned” from ICANN have guided the MSH process at the IGF.

All the above-outlined effects are characteristic for the *global public-policy networks* as defined by Reinicke and Deng (2000). The IGF collaborative process, which has incorporated “lessons learned” from the ICANN formative years, has confirmed the transformative potential of those networks in global governance.

The forum has contributed to placing new issue areas on the global agenda, to closing the participatory gap in public policy, and to developing and disseminating knowledge.

As a distinct network of functionally and geographically dispersed stakeholders, IGF now comprises thousands of individuals who belong to diverse cultures and stakeholder groups, but identify themselves with a common issue-area and experiences. In their particular local settings, each of the members of this network conveys the intellectual, institutional, and cultural influences of the global forum.

The Internet governance is an arena of shifting governance practices. In ICANN, private stakeholders share the decision-making power with governments. In IGF, a large number of participants from around the world share a discursive space, where regulatory principles and directions are shaped. Such arenas of shifting governance practices are constructed in and by historically specific power relations.

To study unstable practices and emerging governance strategies, then, requires a focus on the dynamics of the political process, and on the discursive strategies for influencing that process.

To better understand those power strategies in IGF, we turn next to the model of decentralized and dispersed power that Foucault developed in the early 1980s, and to his concept of “governmentality”, which accounts for the participation of a multitude of agents in a public-policy decision-making process.

Governmentality and Competing Ideologies

Derivative from a new perspective on power as emanating in decentralized networks of relations, and on government³, the concept of *governmentality* emerged from Foucault’s later philosophy (from 1976 to 1984; see Foucault, 1978, 1980, 1982), where he defined and explored “a fresh domain of research into what he called ‘governmental rationality’, or, in his own neologism, ‘governmentality’” (Gordon, 1991, 1).

This perspective is sensitive to discourses, practices and techniques of government. In general, it targets the dynamic map of *political rationalities*, which are more than just ideologies, and connote the ways of thinking about *government as activity*. In particular, it, first, helps us interpret the unique policy approach to the Internet DNS privatization, in the late 1990s, in the neo-liberal rationality of less government and more self-governance, and, second, broadens our understanding of the global IG process. Following Foucault, Dean calls this particular approach to governmentality “analytics of government” and explains that, “[a]n analytics of government... assumes that ... government is accomplished through multiple actors and agencies rather than a centralized set of state apparatuses, and that we must reject any *a priori* distribution and divisions of power and authority...” (Dean, 1999, 26).

³ Thomas Lemke (2000) provides the following summary of Foucault’s understanding of “government”: “*Government* refers to more or less systematized, regulated and reflected modes of power (a ‘technology’) that go beyond the spontaneous exercise of power over others, following a specific form of reasoning (a ‘rationality’) which defines the telos of action or the adequate means to achieve it” (5). (See Lemke, Thomas. “Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique”. Paper presented at the *Rethinking Marxism Conference*, University of Amherst (MA), September 21 – 24, 2000; <http://www.thomaslemkeweb.de/publikationen/Foucault,%20Governmentality,%20and%20Critique%20IV-2.pdf>.)

The governmentality school of research has itself attracted broad attention and followers, but has been criticized for its exclusively “programmatically oriented”, its emphasis on “broad governmental themes rather than specific neo-liberal projects” (Larner, 2000, 12). As Larner suggests, “without analyses of the ‘messy actualities’ of particular neo-liberal projects, those working within this analytic run the risk of precisely the problem they wish to avoid – that of producing generalized accounts of historical epochs” (12).

Nonetheless, it has been recognized that, in comparison to approaches that treat neo-liberalism either as ideology or as an economic-political reality premised on the market extension to government, the perspective of governmentality “deciphers the so-called ‘end of politics’ itself as a political programme” (Lemke, 2000, 10). As Lemke (2000) comments, “the so-called ‘retreat of the state’ is in fact a prolongation of government, neo-liberalism is not the end but a transformation of politics, that restructures the power relations in society. What we observe today is ... a displacement from formal to informal techniques of government and the appearance of new actors on the scene of government (e.g. NGOs), that indicate fundamental transformations in statehood and a new relation between state and civil society actors” (11).

Neoliberal governmentality, as discussed above, is “a transformation of politics that restructures the power relations in society” (Lemke, 2000). Multistakeholder collaboration is one of the practices of that governmentality, which functions on the “shared power” formula and produces consensus, innovation, and learning. The road to consensus, though, goes through a thicket of controversies based on conflicting ideologies.

In analyzing the stakeholder discourse in ICANN, for instance, two competing ideologies about the prerogatives of the corporation were detected (see Author, 2008, 19). On the one hand, there was the purely *technocratic view* of the Management of the Internet DNS, which was focused exclusively on *efficiency and effectiveness*, and gravitated towards defining the ICANN mandate in narrow technical terms: maintaining the stability of the Internet. The protagonists of this view tended to overlook the importance of the political process by which the medium’s architecture was shaped, and were not sincerely interested in the social implications of the ICANN policy.

On the other hand, the champions of the bottom-up consensus view, who were all in opposition to the Interim Board and the Staff, asserted that ICANN's actions had public policy content. In that view, *openness and inclusion* via user representation were as important principles of governance as effectiveness and efficiency were.

The shortcomings of the early-ICANN provided valuable "lessons" to the conveners of the IGF, and, since the very beginning, *openness and inclusion* have been accepted as the cornerstones of the MSH process. Due to the fact that IGF, in contrast to ICANN, does not have a policy-making mandate, the process, in general, is not susceptible to the efficiency rationality – with the exception of the developing countries stakeholders who insisted initially on leading the Internet access discussion towards devising national public-policy models.

'Digital Divide' Reappears on Issues of "Access" at the IGF

The Internet Governance Forum (IGF) is the most significant tangible outcome of the UN World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). The conflicting views on the political authority over the Internet 'root' during the Summit revealed the lack of a common understanding of the intricate technological, economic, and management issues espoused by the global Net. As a result, the WSIS (2005) requested the UN Secretary-General to convene a forum for a multi-stakeholder dialogue.

The IGF was mandated as an open multistakeholder global forum, where expertise and 'best practices' are shared by representatives of legitimate constituent groups on an equal footing. It was premised on the shared interest in preserving the Internet's sustainability, security, stability, and development, and was set to focus on key public policy issues related to the Internet. A Multistakeholder Advisory Group (MAG) is in charge of the Preparatory Process between the annual meetings. Overall, the value of the IGF is seen in the enabling effect of learning, which would lead to actions in other venues (see IGF, 2007). As Chengetai Masango explains in relation to the second IGF (2007), "The richness of the debate, the number of workshops, the multi-stakeholder format, the diversity of opinions, and the number and range of delegates were all cited as indicators of success" (Masango, 2008, p. 64).

Since the WSIS, an overall *development orientation* has guided the IGF agenda. Functioning under the auspices of the UN Secretary-General, and attracting strong government participation, the IGF's agenda was framed as "Internet Governance for Development" at Rio de Janeiro (2007). In that framework, "access to Internet" has been a priority issue area along with "openness", "security", and "diversity", since the IGF in Athens, 2006.

Thus the "access" issue area has been consistently defining the IGF debates, although the participants have demonstrated differing interests in aspects of the issue. The close reading of documents and transcripts from the six editions of IGF (2006-2011) suggests that ideological differences among the participants have emerged on such a principal issue as *the value of the global network*. In the discussions on how the Internet should be treated, the opinions have varied from "the Internet should be treated as food or housing", which is the position of the champions of the "*universal service*" paradigm⁴, to "we should rely on the dynamism of the market". The latter view is mainly espoused by stakeholders on the supply side of the Internet access equation, such as large ISPs and telecom companies. Most of the developing countries participants (government and NGO representatives), as well as the civil society groups from the developed countries and the UN agencies, have framed the Internet governance issues as *universal rights* of access to information and communication, of expression, and of creating local content for the global Net. They have tried to achieve a consensus on construing "access to the Internet" as a development and capacity building policy area. Thus, at the second IGF (2007), focusing on "access" as a priority issue was justified by directing the discussion towards "the next billion users" and closing the "digital divide" development goal. The discursive strategy of using metaphors from the UN development-goals vocabulary did lose its efficiency at the next IGFs, though, due to the strategy of isolating "access" sessions as mainly concerning stakeholders from developing countries.

⁴ To illustrate this framing of the Internet access issue, a participant at the Access and Diversity Session, 2011 IGF, compared connectivity to other essential infrastructures, which are vital for the UN development goals, such as drinking water, transportation, and electricity (see <http://www.intgovforum.org/cms/component/content/article/108-transcripts/861-main-session-access-and-diversity>).

Overall, it can be concluded that the global “digital divide” has largely reemerged at the IGF along the competing ideologies of the “free market” vs. “universal service”. The “haves”, in addition, prioritize issue areas related to the Internet use (i.e. protecting intellectual property online), managing critical resources, and coordinating security and stability policies, while the “have-nots” complain about the high international traffic costs, search for effective infrastructure-building public policy models, and learn how to rely on regional cooperation and community initiative in accessing the Internet and producing local content.

As the discourse analysis of the IGF “access” discussions suggests next, the power dynamics of the process privileges certain positions and strategies, but this could diminish the learning potential of the forum.

Due to the initial strong focus on the development aspects of access to Internet, at the last four IGFs (2008 and 2011) the sessions dedicated to “access” attracted *exclusively participants from developing countries*. It seems that “access” sessions have become secluded discursive space, where concerns about Internet infrastructure and “best practices” are shared among mainly representatives of the public sector and civil society from Africa and Latin America. At the 2007 IGF, for instance, there were at least four workshops⁵ (from fourteen overall), where “access” concerns were discussed, and which were organized by a number of intergovernmental agencies, global and national academic affiliations, and, partly, business representatives. It is remarkable, though, that there was a rather limited participation in those particular workshops by Internet service providers, regional and ccTLD registrars, and technologists, in general.

Moreover, the conspicuous absence of stakeholders from Internet development and technical communities, as well as businesses, from the developed countries signals a particular lack of commitment to the development aspect of the “access” issue area. Actually, those participants have gradually switched their attention to debates on Internet critical resources, security and stability, multilingualism, etc.

⁵ The titles of some of those workshops suggest which aspect of IG were prioritized at IGF 2009: “Regulatory frameworks for improving access”, “Qualifying, quantifying, and meeting the challenges of Internet access costs”, “Making accessibility a reality in emerging technologies and the Web”, and “Toward a development agenda for Internet Governance”.

One can only conclude that the “access” debate has been deprived from technical and economic expertise, which is so much needed by government representatives, in particular, when they consider public policy solutions for underserved areas. In the words of one East African participants, who reported at the 2009 IGF, “Policy and regulation [are] still a major issue in our region... because we are still developing policies regarding access to the Internet, and that’s where we feel... that the global IGF could be of immense assistance to our region in terms of just *a framework around which we can develop some of our policy and regulation* from all the discussions and the debate that come out of the global policy process” (emphasis added; IGF, 2009-1, p. 9).

It is apparent that, for participants representing some developing countries, the “added value” of the global IGF is in the learning potential of that open-forum. Yet, by withdrawing relevant technical, legal, and policy-making expertise, stakeholders from the developed countries, in effect, contribute to deepening the knowledge gap, which the IGF was set to bridge.

Conversely, participants in workshops on other than “access” issues have already expressed concerns that the debate lacks perspectives provided by the developing countries representatives. It was noted at the 2007 IGF’s workshop “Content regulation and the duty of states to protect fundamental rights”, which was organized by the Council of Europe, the pan-European association of the Internet services providers, and the Association for Progressive Communication, that “the debates around harmful content and its regulations lack[s] participation of end-users living in different context, especially suppressed voices of other than those of the economic North, and of women” (Doria and Kleinwachter, 2008, p. 390).

The IGF participants were one more time reminded of the decisive differences in positions by Markus Kummer, the IGF’s Executive Coordinator: “there are different perspectives, depending on where you come from. On one of these issues, anonymity, different views are held whether it’s good or bad in the developed world, whether it helps democracy or undermines democracy. Nii [Quanynor, Chairman, Network Computer Systems, Accra, Ghana] reminded us that *the African perspective is somewhat different, and there access remained the number-one issue*” (emphasis added) (Doria and Kleinwachter, 2008, p. 361).

Indeed, the open-ended discussions at the IGF allow for parallel discourses to coexist, and often they do not share a common understanding of what the priority issues are, or should be. As the Theory of Collaboration suggests, in MSH forums differing views are expressed in the search for alternative solutions, and, through learning, consensus on definitions emerge, as well as mutually-acceptable solutions are devised.

Defining Access to Internet

From the perspective of the developing countries participants, all other IG issues are subsumed under the "access" concern.

As the Nigerian Communications Commission representative explained, "Access, to me, means being connected to the Internet *at the right speed* and *at the right price*, and linked to *the right content* at the right time and at the right place" (emphases added) (IGF, 2009-2, 7). Thus, building telecommunication infrastructure for broadband Internet that is available to poor rural as well as marginalized urban communities is a priority public policy issue for the African countries. The Western stakeholders, though, see that as an exclusively national and regional concern, and responsibility. Relying on their expertise in networking, they advise their African and Latin American colleagues to unleash the power of market competition by implementing policies of deregulation. They try to convince them that "the real problem is in the local loop", which is often controlled by a single company, and that "the problem is not the cost of the international bandwidth, but, rather, the cost of the domestic access" (Doria and Kleinwachter, 2008, p.182-183). They even try to scare them with "the dangers" of government regulation of the Internet, which would make it "difficult and expensive" to connect a private network to the global Net (Verizon's representative at the 2006 IGF; see Doria and Kleinwachter, 2008, 185). Yet, as some IGF participants explain, developing countries depend on Western telecom companies for access to the global Internet, and the high cost of international connectivity impacts on the affordability of services for the end users.

The realization that Internet governance means different things to different parts of the world has induced a number of regional meetings (regional IGFs) between the annual IGFs. At the 2009 IGF in Egypt, at a special "Regional perspectives" session, reports were presented about such gatherings that took place in Latin America, Europe, East Africa, West Africa, and the Arab region (IGF, 2009-1).

At the developing economies regions meetings, “access” was linked to development goals – capacity building and affordable connectivity, to harmonization of regulatory practices, to the right of access to all information available and the right to communicate, and to multilingualism and providing incentives to develop local content.

In the last two years, there has been a noticeable maturation of the debate on access on the developing countries’ side. **First**, at the fourth IGF (2009), the special “access” session was *opened to a broader scope of issues* aside from telecom infrastructure related ones. Representatives from African, Latin America and Asian countries focused on policies, regulations, and right issues (see IGF, 2009-2).

The next two years, the theme of “access” shifted towards access as a human right, linguistic diversity, implementation of the internationalized domain names (IDNs), network neutrality, and local content creation. This was reflected in renaming the sessions as “Access and Diversity” and in finding a new place for the infrastructure concerns of the developing countries. In the words of a Multistakeholder Advising Group (MAG) member, “when we organized these sessions, we shifte[ed] a little bit the focus ... towards access to knowledge and languages and diversity, and left the infrastructure issues for the development main session” (IGF 2010, p. 18).

How was this experienced by the developing countries participants, though? The representative of AT&T in South Asia stated that “there’s a paradigm difference between the manner in which access issues are being debated in the developed world and in the developing world especially South Asia... I think the debate today has helped at least understands the gap, the vast space that exists between the haves and the have nots, the digital divide not just within a country but between countries” (IGF 2010, p. 34). He further explained that the network neutrality debate, for instance, hasn’t even “surfaced” in South Asia: “The focus [there] is completely to get the infrastructure out there, get the right policies... the access is so small [in numbers] right now that... [I] don’t even think there’s an anticipation of a dialogue on this for the next 4 to 5 years” (IGF 2010, p. 29).

Second, the developing countries representatives in IGF have *mastered a new discursive strategy* for participation in the discussions.

In order to be included, to be heard, and to be effective, they have adopted the vocabulary of the Western participants, and they frame now “access” either as a “universal right” issue, when international donors and governments are addressed (such phrases as “right to access to information”, “freedom of expression”, “Internet as a public good” are used), or as a “social responsibility” issue, when the goal is to sensitize service providers to development concerns (such as the need for broadband rural connectivity in African countries).

Third, the IGF discussion on “access” has entered another stage with *adding sharing of “best practices”* to the dominant “identification of concerns” orientation. Thus, at the 2009 IGF, the representative of the Latin American Networks School Foundation, EsLaRed, based in Venezuela, described low-cost technological-solution projects for achieving connectivity that have been implemented in Africa “directly by the communities that will benefit from them, and not necessarily by big corporation[s] that sometimes do not have the incentive to serve rural and sparsely populated areas” (IGF, 2009-2, 8). It is significant that IGF can help overcome the major obstacle of “lack of awareness” about such community-based “access” solutions, and that is seen as one of the learning outcomes of the open multistakeholder dialogue there (see Author, 2010).

Forth, with the growth of technical expertise, *a better understanding has emerged of the technical, economic, and public policy issues* involved in resolving the “access” problems for the developing countries. This has allowed the participants to identify appropriate levels of policy making and implementation. At the conclusion of the first IGF (2006), it was noted, for instance, that “[t]here was broad agreement that the most appropriate level to address issues of access is the national level... key stakeholders and the main locus for policy development and implements was at the national level” (Doria and Kleinwachter, 2008, p. 200). As a result of sharing experiences about implementing technological solutions by different stakeholders, a new appreciation of regional and community approaches was developed. Thus, the participants in the 2008 IGF “Access” panel session agreed that, by creating regional Internet Exchange Point (IXPs), broadband and quality of access at the regional level is enhanced, and the cost for international data traffic is reduced (see Doria and Kleinwachter, 2008, p. 229). Another vehicle for coordinating national policies on “access” are the regional IGFs.

Overall, it can be concluded, that the global “digital divide” is rather well-represented and observed at the IGF. It begins from conflicting definitions of Internet Governance, where the issue of access to Internet infrastructure is seen either as belonging to the field (by the developing countries), or as an unnecessary expansion of it (by the developed countries).

As a representative of Afiliis, a leading domain name registry operator, noted at the 2010 IGF, “we [participants from developed countries] tend to fall into the trap that... we’re discussing [issues] in the Western world... and we should always be aware that basic infrastructure and basic access has to be set up before we really get into those other issues” (IGF 2010, p. 34).

Conclusion

This study attempts to demonstrate the complexities of the emerging global Internet governance issue area by outlining its historical context and the evolution of multistakeholder collaboration in two principal global venues. To help us understand those complexities, theoretical guidance was sought from Interorganizational Studies and the Foucauldian post-modern interpretation of power and government. From the critical analysis of the debates on one prominent area, namely “access to Internet”, conclusions were drawn about conflicting definitions, expectations, and experiences. When analyzed, those differences were interpreted as a demonstration of the North-South “digital divide”, which has reemerged in global Internet governance forums. It was suggested that the developed world’s concerns with human rights and content development were allowed to dominate the IGF discussions on “access”. At the same time, as some participants have suggested, the developing countries governments struggle with providing basic infrastructure and connectivity for the Internet to millions of their citizens due to lack of investment and to the prohibitively high international connection fees.

What does the future hold for the global Net and its users? It is well established that the “next billion” users will be people living in developing countries, but how are they going to change the network? Who is going to prevail in the dollar-marked debate on what constitutes online intellectual property theft – is it the industrial-age entertainment industries, or the digital-age young libertarians, who ride on BitTorrent applications and master their ‘remix’ creativity?

Moreover, is the government coming back, after its initial reluctance, in the mid-1990s, to regulate the omnipresent Internet, or is it going to stay content with its role of being just one of the stakeholders at venues, where the governance regime of the global medium is coined?

Diverse stakeholder groups are presently debating those issues at the Internet Governance fora. From the policy-setting oriented proceedings in ICANN and from the open discussions at the IGF some common understandings emerge on the complexities of the issues and on the alternative solutions. As the analysis presented in this study suggests, there are still some deep divisions among the stakeholders in the IG field, rooted in the differing socio-economic, cultural, and political contexts. From the parallel discourses and conflicting views, though, the regulatory environment for the future global Internet emerges.

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List of Acronyms

- ccTLD – country code top-level domain
- **DoC** – Department of Commerce (U.S.)
- **DNS** - Domain Name System (Internet)
- **GAC** – Governmental Advisory Committee (ICANN)
- **ICANN** - Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers
- **IDNs** – internationalized domain names
- **IFWP** – Internet Forum for the White Paper
- **IG** – Internet governance
- **IGF** – Internet Governance Forum
- **ITU** – International Telecommunications Union
- **IXP** – Internet Exchange Point
- **MSH** – multistakeholder (collaboration)
- **NII** – National Information Infrastructure (U.S. project)
- **WGIG** – Working Group on Internet Governance (UN WSIS)
- **WSIS** – World Summit on Information Society (UN)