Internet Governance for Libraries

A Guide to the Policies and Processes behind the Internet and their Impact
Part 3: The Main Actors in the Internet Governance Landscape

A key feature of internet governance is the 'multistakeholder' model – the engagement of a wide range of actors in discussions and decision-making. This is unprecedented, but also necessary in order to ensure that all perspectives on the complex technological, legal, social, and economic public policy issues the internet raises.

The WSIS 2005 Tunis Agenda for Information Society clearly defined the actors involved, including governments, businesses, civil society, academia, international organizations and the technical sector. Below, you will find an overview of their role and contribution to the internet governance debate.

Governments

One of the most striking characteristics of the internet is that it emerged independently of government. Only in 2003 with the WSIS Declaration of Principles did governments start to enter onto the internet governance scene.

This represented a challenge for many governments, which had been used to working only with their peers at the international level. Now, they had to interact with diverse non-governmental internet governance regimes and practices.

Of course, the internet also required action at the national level, given its inescapable impact on the economy, society and culture. Nonetheless, the development of national strategies needed to take account of the relatively borderless nature of the internet.

Therefore, at the beginning, national internet policies and strategies tended to focus on national regulatory agencies and ministries of telecommunication. However, as the breadth of the impact of the internet became clearer, other departments such as culture, media and foreign affairs, became increasingly heavily involved.

In parallel, of course, communities of people interested in internet governance developed in civil society and academia – often before governments' own efforts. These groups demanded interlocutors, and accelerated the development of national internet policies and responsibilities.

In some cases, such as those of the governments of Brazil and Kenya there have been innovative and inclusive solutions, allowing a wider range of people to engage in internet governance discussions.

However, in others, efforts are still unsuccessful, leading to a lack of policy coherence within and among nation states. This can be the result in particular of competing policy interests, for example with the various approaches of human rights, trade, standardisation and security taking very different positions on privacy and data protection.

Importantly, this lack of coordination can take place both in developed and developing countries. DIPLO's Internet Governance Guide for example discusses how the debate around Internet Governance, for example, was a good example of the difficulties of achieving a balance between two opposite parties with clear set agenda and goals.

Business Sector

Businesses have always been part of the internet governance landscape. In addition to the telephone companies over whose cables people accessed the internet, an early concern was around trademarks. This was felt in particular around the issue of 'cybersquatting' – the practice of registering names, especially well-known company or brand names, as Internet domains, in the hope of reselling them at a profit/

As the internet matured, two different business profiles emerged: companies active in the technical infrastructure and companies that work in the broader internet industry sector.

The former group includes all those companies that deal with domain names registration. These companies maintain a registry of the top-level domains (TLD) such as .com, .net, and make sure that these addresses are unique and available to end users. They also follow closely ICANN's (the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers) policy decision.

Other technical companies include the telecommunication companies that manage the internet infrastructure and traffic such as AT&T, T-Mobile, Telecom and Telekom and Internet Service Providers. Both groups participate in international meetings (and less know regional) processes such as WSIS and IGF but also ICANN and the International Telecommunications Union (ITU).

Their priority in debates tends to be to ensure a business-friendly environment to further their commercial interests as in the case of the telecommunication companies to the management of the key online intermediaries as in the case of the ISP.

The second group of the business sector is made up of companies whose business model is based on the Internet. They can roughly be differentiated in companies producing online content for the Internet – either exclusively (such as Google, or Facebook), and those with both digital and analogue offerings (such as Disney). It also covers platforms such as AirBnB which can only exist because of the possibilities created by the internet.

They are interested in topics such as net neutrality (which impacts the speed at which their sites can be accessed, and so their attractiveness), as well as cybersecurity, privacy, intellectual property online, and privacy. They play an increasingly important role in international instruments such as WIPO, IGF and WTO, as well as in discussions around taxation and consumer protection.

Another sub-group are new providers of internet communication services, such as Skype or WhatsApp. Here too, there are concerns around privacy. National security concerns also apply, with tension over the degree to which surveillance of communication should be possible.

Civil Society

Civil society has been highly involved in internet governance and digital policy matters since the beginning. They have been strong voices for a range of interests, from human rights to infrastructure development and consumer protection. For obvious reasons, they have also supported the multi-stakeholder approach which has allowed them to play such a prominent role in discussions. They have made full use of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) and Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG) to make their points.

However, a challenge for this group remains the effective coordination of the different stakeholders and their interests. This is perhaps inevitable – there is no 'average' internet user, and so no single

way of representing them all. But the diversity of ideas and positions can mean that the influence of civil society is reduced.

While in the past, civil society tended to focus mainly on trying to influence (or criticise government), more recently we have seen a tendency to consider governments as a way of counterbalancing the dominance of major internet platforms. Such businesses are increasingly seen as posing a threat to civil society priorities (privacy etc), and coordination between governments and NGOs offers a means to address them.

An important evolution in civil society development encompass its relationship with governments. From an earlier idea that consider governments as an equal partner in the internet governance landscape, governments are now seen more as effective engine to counterbalance the dominant role of the business sector, especially to the detriment and protection of civil society.

International Organizations & the technical community

In different ways, intergovernmental organisations (such as the UN and its agencies) and the technical community (experts, as well as agencies involve in the practicalities of how the internet works) have been drivers of the development of internet governance as a field.

Of the intergovernmental organisations, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) has been particularly active, helping to organise the World Summit of the Information Society.

However, the ITU has not become the lead United Nations agency for internet issues, given the concern of some countries that its inter-governmental nature (where individual member states can veto decisions) made it unsuitable to take on this role. Furthermore, other UN agencies have argued that they also have an important stake in the way the internet works, not least UNESCO and the UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs.

Meanwhile the technical community is arguably the one which can take the credit for the creation of the internet itself. It includes organisations such as the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) and Internet Assigned Numbers Authority (IANA).

Their role has evolved though, from representing a broad stakeholder group to a specialised one, focusing on more detailed or standards-based discussions. There is some suggestion that the more formal organisations that form the core of the technical community might even be absorbed into academic think tanks or civil society efforts.