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Advancing Multi-stakeholderism for Global Governance of the Internet and AI

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Key Points

- There are growing tensions between the multilateral and multi-stakeholder approach to governing the internet and other digital technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI). Recent advancements in AI have prompted debates on whether a decentralized governance model can respond to increasing threats posed by powerful, transnational technology developers.
- Growing strains on multilateralism can be explained by shifting geopolitical and economic power distribution between North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members and non-members. However, multilateralism can compel policy coordination and cost reduction within the present, highly fragmented global AI governance ecosystem.
- Multi-stakeholderism, while not a panacea, principally offers a pathway of equal footing for state and non-state actors to influence AI governance. However, this approach is only possible if concerned stakeholders are deliberate about designing multi-stakeholder mechanisms throughout the product life cycle.

Introduction

Since the launch of Our Common Agenda¹ and Pact for the Future by UN Secretary-General António Guterres in 2021, there has been a growing concern among several democratic nation-states and civil society groups about the United Nations' role in advancing an *exclusively multilateral* approach to internet governance. This is a strikingly different position from the bottom-up, *multi-stakeholder* approach, instituted by the Geneva Declaration² and Tunis Agenda (International Telecommunications Union 2005) that formed the bedrock of internet governance for the past 20 years. Despite criticisms, the proposed Global Digital Compact (GDC),³ annexed to the Pact for the Future, was adopted by member states at the Summit of the Future during the seventy-ninth session of the UN General Assembly with the ambitious objective of establishing a “shared vision for an open, free, secure and human-centered digital future” (United Nations 2023). Although the final adopted text of the GDC calls on states to recognize that “internet governance must continue to be global and multi-

1 See www.un.org/en/common-agenda.

2 See United Nations (2005).

3 See www.un.org/techenvoy/global-digital-compact.

About the Author

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A computational social scientist by training, Sabhanaz has more than 17 years of experience at the intersection of technology policy, ethics and international development. She was most recently the head of public policy for Bangladesh at Meta, where she engaged policy makers and led on various regulatory and legislative issues, including hate speech, privacy, data protection and the data economy, online harms and algorithmic transparency. Sabhanaz also worked at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, leading policy and advocacy efforts in multidisciplinary digital identity and economy, data and AI. Her career spans the private and public sectors in the United States, Asia and Africa, including work with the United States Agency for International Development and the World Bank, on encryption policy, digital trade, AI applications in the global majority and internet governance.

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stakeholder in nature, with the full involvement of Governments, the private sector, civil society, international organizations, technical and academic communities and all other relevant groups,” the drafting process fell short of upholding this process of meaningful engagement with diverse stakeholders (Article 19 2024; Access Now 2024).

This growing tension between the multilateral and multi-stakeholder models prompts critical questions about the future of the internet. Some experts believe that the internet's decentralized architecture can only reach its full potential if its governance is also decentralized (Komaitis 2024). Multilateralism risks exposing “technical internet governance,” — specifically standards and protocols development processes — to enhanced state control and surveillance (Ringhof 2023). Others argue that multilateralism forces coordination among the United Nations' 193 member states, which each have their own legal and socio-political considerations. Without some form of centralization, the vast heterogeneity of political will and capabilities across national jurisdictions risks an inefficient distribution of resources that fails to address universal risks and harms (Gutierrez 2023).

These tensions highlight a broader shift in internet governance from being a technical area of contention to a political power play, embedded within a broader set of rules, institutions and processes (Bradshaw et al. 2015), also known as a cyber regime complex (Nye 2014).

The debate over internet ownership increasingly intensified through polarized views on who should govern AI. At the AI Seoul Summit in mid-2024, Secretary-General Guterres urged states to support the United Nations to “build the foundations of global AI governance” at the Summit of the Future (United Nations 2024). This statement was subsequently echoed by the GDC, which highlighted the “international governance of artificial intelligence for the benefit of humanity” as one of its primary objectives. The rapid proliferation of AI technologies has led to new applications and services reliant on internet connectivity, in turn resurfacing concerns about whether the internet's decentralized governance is sufficient in mitigating the risks posed by networked surveillance and harmful decision-making automation. These emerging models of digital technologies highlight the need to account for non-state factors in governance, such as transnational private companies that control design principles and the

exchange of information worldwide (Leiser and Murray 2016). The discourse has shifted from the search for a single global institutional solution to the emergence of multiple and overlapping global institutions that tackle specific concerns, uses and impacts of AI and emerging digital technologies (Tallberg et al. 2023). The present reality of AI applications creating cross-border externalities invokes a role for multi-jurisdictional consensus building.

Cyberspace is a complex, multi-layered structure comprised of hardware, software, labour and networks. AI technologies mostly operate at the software or application layer, relying heavily on hardware and network infrastructure. Rather than being stand-alone entities, AI technologies are designed to be integrated into a wide range of products, services and systems (Araya and Nieto-Gómez 2020). Be that as it may, the technical parallels and dissimilarities between internet and AI governance are beyond the scope of this policy brief. Instead, the focus here is on examining the multilateral and multi-stakeholder models of internet governance to inform approaches to AI governance.

Multilateralism in the Age of AI

The current global AI governance landscape is reflective of a multitude of governance initiatives by different actors, including existing multilateral bodies:

- The Group of Seven (G7) Hiroshima AI Process⁴ introduced voluntary commitments to ensure international cooperation toward “safe, secure and trustworthy AI.”⁵
- The European Union passed the AI Act.

4 See www.soumu.go.jp/hiroshimaaiprocess/en/index.html.

5 European Union, Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 laying down harmonised rules on artificial intelligence and amending Regulations (EC) No 300/2008, (EU) No 167/2013, (EU) No 168/2013, (EU) 2018/858, (EU) 2018/1139 and (EU) 2019/2144 and Directives 2014/90/EU, (EU) 2016/797 and (EU) 2020/1828 (Artificial Intelligence Act), [2024] OJ, L 2024/1689, online: <<https://artificialintelligenceact.eu/>>.

- The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development⁶ and the Group of Twenty have ongoing AI governance efforts to similarly foster global cooperation.
- In addition to the GDC, specialized units at the United Nations, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization,⁷ have introduced AI governance recommendations to facilitate cross-border consensus building on AI ethics.

Governance actors differ in their agenda- and norm-setting powers, resulting in divergence in adoption and compliance both by the entities they aim to govern and by other regime complexes.

The centralization of regime complexes can support the effective management and consolidation of fragmented political power toward mutually beneficial outcomes, reducing the risk of non-compliance. For example, effective multilateralism, as evident in international bodies such as the World Trade Organization, has led to the efficient application of common trade rules worldwide, from influencing nation-states to molding international trade order and norms (Cihon, Maas and Kemp 2020). The centralization of AI governance could similarly enable effective foresight analyses to respond to technological advancements that are uncertain in terms of substance and policy impact and inform policy responses across global regime complexes. Governance centralization would also reduce costs, minimize duplicate efforts and simplify participation (Esty and Ivanova 2002). These are all particularly pervasive challenges in the presently siloed AI governance landscape, where distributed regime complexes have led to burdensome participation costs for less-resourced states and non-state actors, as well as duplicative investments in risk and policy analyses.

However, centralization through multilateralism is not without its flaws. Recent years have seen growing strains on multilateral systems as an effective means of tackling global economic and social challenges, for which there are a few possible explanations. First, the concentration of geo-economic and geo-political powers has shifted from select Western countries, namely the United States, to a more multipolar landscape,

6 See <https://oecd.ai/en/ai-principles>.

7 See www.unesco.org/en/artificial-intelligence/recommendation-ethics.

including China, India and the European Union (Linn 2017). This has led to rising nationalism and confrontations between nation-states, fuelled by domestic political factors. Multilateral consensus building is paralyzed by a “trust deficit disorder” that is being exacerbated by unilateral sanctions placed by powerful actors on the less powerful and arbitrary adherence to international principles (United Nations 2018). Five veto-wielding permanent members in the UN Security Council hold a disproportionate authority over peace and security, with China, Russia and the United States engaging in a hostile tug-of-war, often at the expense of deprioritizing issues raised by other frustrated member states. This uneven power dynamic compels a shift from international rule-based, multilateral negotiations to transactional, bilateral agreements in order to achieve nation-state objectives (Linn 2017).

Second, there is a growing resistance to American unilateralism, or a tendency for Washington to make decisions without much regard for the interests of its own allies or the rest of the world (Maynes 1999). Prime historic examples include sanctions on allied trade with Cuba or Iran, which violates international law. Since 2022, the US government has tightened export controls of chips and chip-making equipment aimed at hobbling China’s ability to develop advanced AI technologies, and has lobbied its allies, as well as Japan, South Korea and the Netherlands, to do the same (Hawkins, Koc and Furukawa 2024). Experts characterize US behaviour at the United Nations as neither multilateralist (not accommodating to the majority) nor minilateralist (not aligning with its closest NATO allies), exacerbating growing discontent about American hegemony in intergovernmental negotiations (Holloway 2000).

Third, authoritarian actors are increasingly reshaping procedural rules within international multilateral fora to align cyber and AI policies more closely with their values, a process also known as authoritarian multilateralism (Raymond and Sherman 2024). There are both overt and covert tendencies in China, Russia and Saudi Arabia to incorporate collectivist language on “societal and economic welfare” into multilateral agreements or treaties, which enable state-led technology control and censorship, and thereby gain legitimacy through multilateral mechanisms (Diya 2024). By lending legitimacy to authoritarian actors, multilateral processes face an existential

crisis as they operate at an increasing remove from their intended goal of intergovernmental cooperation toward the “development of a stronger international society, well-functioning international institutions and a rule-based international order” (Bouchard, Peterson and Tocci 2014; Council of the European Union 2003).

Although China is not an official member of the Group of 77 (G77) — a coalition of 134 developing countries — its positions often closely align with those of this group. During the GDC deliberations, China actively promoted its foreign policy on cyber sovereignty (Komaitis 2024). Between 2016 and 2017, the Chinese central government released a series of strategic papers outlining its ambition to become a global AI superpower by 2030. Among other applications, the Chinese government has used AI to advance administrative efficiency, strengthen public safety and detect crimes, often leveraging advanced surveillance technologies (Zeng 2020). With the support of the G77, China has not only socialized its domestic vision for AI innovation and governance but has also established itself as a leading voice within the United Nations (Cuihong 2018).

Overcentralization through multilateralism thwarts participation, particularly in AI governance. Key actors in AI development — likely powerful states — are generally resistant to the global regulation of AI because they perceive AI growth as a source of competitive advantage (Roberts et al. 2024). This sense of competition results in states enacting policies that would strengthen their international position, or enable forum shopping, that is, seeking to realize policy objectives within preferred policy arenas on the basis of their governing characteristics (Murphy and Kellow 2013). In other words, multilateralism risks undermining public interest and societal benefits.

Lessons from Multi-stakeholderism in Internet Governance

Any conversation on internet governance, without fail, starts with the premise that the internet is governed by a unique multi-stakeholder model that can be traced back to the Geneva and Tunis meetings of the World Summit on the Information Society in 2003 and 2005 (International Telecommunication Union 2005; Maurer and Morgus 2014). The UN working group tasked with defining internet governance extended its

meaning to encompass a wide array of policy issues “that shape the evolution and use of the Internet” (Working Group on Internet Governance 2005). This expanded definition, coupled with the widespread adoption of a multi-stakeholder approach, acknowledges that governance of the internet involves not only governments or political institutions but also businesses, civil society and technical communities.

While there are different interpretations of multi-stakeholderism, in the most general sense, it entails two or more classes of actors engaged in a common, public interest governance process through a polyarchic relationship (Raymond and DeNardis 2015). Simplified further, it involves four classes of actors: the government, international and intergovernmental organizations, businesses and civil society. While multi-stakeholderism is often seen as more loosely structured than multilateralism, it does encompass polyarchic authority relations defined by how individual instances are circumscribed by shared rules and understandings (ibid.).

The multi-stakeholder approach to governance has struggled with a universal definition of what constitutes diverse and participatory authority relations. In reality, it represents a complex ecosystem with different functions ranging from the control of internet resources and standards to the policy role of information intermediaries (DeNardis 2014). This tension is exemplified by how authority relations are distributed at the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) and the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF) — both widely understood as effective multi-stakeholder models. At ICANN, formal powers vary by actor (heterogenous polyarchy), while power is more evenly distributed at the IETF (homogenous polyarchy), highlighting that there is no one uniform approach to multi-stakeholder governance (Raymond and DeNardis 2015). AI governance would similarly consist of coordination across several infrastructure and application layers, prompting questions about which layers of governance involve a single class of actors and which can facilitate a polyarchic multi-stakeholder process.

Despite its claim of inclusion of a broad range of stakeholders within the internet community, multi-stakeholderism is not devoid of criticism. Some experts argue that multi-stakeholder internet governance reinforces existing power relations

rather than disrupting them (Carr 2015). Of the four classes of actors involved, civil society remains systematically disempowered and plays the unwilling role of legitimizing the positions of other actors, depending on the issue and sociopolitical backdrop. Conversely, the transnational technology private sector is dominated by multinational corporations of US origin that wield significant influence and tend to co-opt multi-stakeholder processes to advance profit motivations. Nation-states are unwilling to relinquish their sovereignty, establishing an implicit hierarchical relationship between governments and the “rest of the actors.” Critics have outlined the US-led liberal political construct that dominated multi-stakeholder governance, insofar that it fails to meaningfully accommodate non-US stakeholders or normative values (Bendiek 2014). Different classes of actors prefer the type of governance models that maximizes their political interests rather than having an intrinsic preference (Kahler and Lake 2003). Moreover, the lack of diversity in debates about internet governance signals that multi-stakeholderism can become a rhetorical exercise in limiting criticism while countering disproportionate control of specific nation-states as opposed to a participatory mechanism for managing a global resource (Padovani and Pavan 2007).

Multi-stakeholderism within the discourse of internet governance is frequently elevated as a value in itself rather than a possible approach to governance that preserves interoperability, openness and security (Raymond and DeNardis 2015). Because this “value” is loosely defined, it has numerous interpretations that result in poor coordination and implementation. There is a tendency to apply multilateralism homogenously to all internet functions and contexts, rather than determining what time of administration is best fitted for competing equities around interoperability, openness and security in a particular political context. Careful examinations of the multi-stakeholder model finds that there are more interrogations on who contributes to discussions on internet governance, instead of the practice of governance itself (ibid.).

Reimagining Multi-stakeholderism in the Age of AI

Given its widespread popularity and normative acceptance within the internet community, there is growing advocacy around adopting a multi-

stakeholder approach to global AI governance. In this scenario, multi-stakeholderism is interpreted through the lens of “collaborative governance” or “cooperative policies” this approach aims to balance the interests of all stakeholders for accountable and responsive governance of AI technologies (Gianni, Lehtinen and Nieminen 2022).

Some experts argue that the meaningful participation of a wide range of state and non-state actors through effective multi-stakeholder processes can have a positive impact on consensus building, knowledge sharing and establishing a pragmatic policy discourse on AI and other emerging technology issues (Nonnecke 2016). While international regime complexes may be controlled by the most powerful actors, these same regimes can be used by actors with limited national capabilities as sources of power (Krasner 1983). Although actors’ preferences change, the norms and rules of the regime remain constant, resulting in an opportunity gap for weaker actors to intervene and raise their concerns. This power shift is evident in the formation of non-binding multi-stakeholder policy groups on technology governance (Nonnecke 2016).

AI governance should be understood as a conflict between two different conceptions of liberalism, rather than one between multilateral and multi-stakeholder models as polar opposites (Bendiek 2014). A liberal multilateral approach centres on an intergovernmental body that maintains political hierarchy while meaningfully including non-government voices. In contrast, a liberal multi-stakeholder approach relies on rough consensus among state and non-state actors for decision making. To address criticisms of US hegemony in internet governance, an effective multi-stakeholder governance model must respond to non-US concerns while upholding the norms and standards rooted in liberal principles.

Recommendations

→ **Centre AI governance in robust multi-stakeholderism:** Despite its limitations, multi-stakeholderism in internet communities has enabled participation and deliberations among different state and non-state actors. Both types of actors should strongly emphasize a multi-stakeholder approach to governing

AI, particularly to ensure that it results in a pragmatic policy discourse and reduces power and resource asymmetries between wealthier and less-developed regions.

- **Design deliberate processes for meaningful participation from non-state actors:** Proponents of the multi-stakeholder approach to AI governance should take stock of lessons from internet governance and ensure deliberate design and space building to accommodate diverse non-state voices in discussion and decision making. This process should entail not only the decentralization of how decisions are made and who participates, but also building the capacity of communities with fewer resources to meaningfully take part in global negotiations.
- **Ensure accountability in international multi-stakeholder AI governance processes:** International organizations such as the United Nations have an important role to play to build consensus across fragmented AI governance projects; however, this cannot be at the expense of excluding non-state voices, nor the uprooting of existing models and structures. International governance frameworks need to be coupled with quantifiable metrics — particularly those of non-state actors — around access and participation, agency, decision making and influence to ensure that multi-stakeholder models are effective and legitimate.

Conclusion

The past 20 years of multi-stakeholder internet governance offers important lessons for adopting a multi-stakeholder approach to global AI governance. This is especially salient in recent years with multilateral processes being increasingly co-opted by authoritarian states and value archetypes, exacerbating state control over AI and other emerging technologies. Given that the global state of AI governance is still at a nascent stage, policy makers and members of the private sector, civil society and other concerned parties should leverage this window of opportunity to set the norms around effective and inclusive multi-stakeholder models. In order for the multi-stakeholder model to be robust, both standard setting and policy mechanics of information intermediaries need to be compliant with

fundamental rights, transparency, inclusiveness and accountability. Moreover, AI governance should not be treated as homogenous or monolithic, but instead should disaggregate across infrastructure, network and application layers of AI systems to determine which administrative approach can best address the needs at hand, while at the same time ensuring political and technical contextualities.

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