

# Net Dialogue Perspectives on International Net Governance

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**T**HE WORLD SUMMIT on the Information Society (WSIS) began as a response to the major shifts that the Internet was causing in social arrangements. Those same factors persist at the end of the WSIS process: the Internet's growing importance has left the state in a position of reliance on private enterprises for expertise and flexibility in decision-making. Meanwhile, the international nature of the Internet has forced states to recognize their interdependence, with a certain tendency toward international federalism emerging. As individuals perceive this shift, they are asking what this international integration means for their relationship to the state, and their very rights as citizens in the information society. Still, many people are simply embracing the Internet and forming new, international communities online, while business opportunities abound. Because these societal shifts were recognized by representatives at the Geneva Phase of WSIS, they agreed on the Declaration of Principles – calling for multilateral, transparent, democratic, coordinated, and multi-stakeholder approaches to decision-making in the networked world.

## **Fine-tuning the present**

In recent years, more than a dozen intergovernmental organizations have been making rules for the networked world. Because these bodies deal with hundreds of other topics as well, information on Internet-related initiatives is lost amongst other material on their web sites and in written reports. In other words, with the current arrangement, the mere task of tracking what Internet governance is taking place, and where, is enormously time consuming. A person has to sift through hundreds of web pages to arrive at this information.

Indeed, participants in the technology development community, academia, the media, government, intergovernmental organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) attest that it has been exceedingly difficult to follow international Internet governance as it occurs in diverse bodies. For example:

Government representatives are often too busy carrying out their own work to follow the whole range of developments in Internet policy. Large delegations may distribute work in such a way that representatives fail to update each other as they report back to separate agencies in their capital. Meanwhile, small delegations (e.g., from developing countries) are too thinly stretched to cover all the meetings

So, too, staffs of intergovernmental organizations have pre-assigned work, and tracking Internet policymaking in other organizations on subjects beyond their specific duties would seem to go outside their mandate

Nor can businesses intent on the bottom line afford to employ people to monitor all Internet-related activities of intergovernmental organizations. While these activities may be important, if

they are not directly related to that company's current goals, shareholders do not want to bear the cost of contributing to the policy process for the general good

NGOs and academic researchers focusing on specific aspects of Internet policy are on even more restricted budgets, so despite their interest in following the totality of Internet decision-making, they simply cannot afford to do so

The media know that reporting on the successive stages of policymaking does not draw large audiences, so they choose to wait until rules are ripe for decision, or until their implementation raises problems, before reporting on them.

In short, no group that is normally involved in international Internet governance has been able to follow the full range of developments. It is not surprising, then, that there has been little appreciation for the cumulative effect of international Internet governance, and negligible public input. Clearly, these intergovernmental processes are not yet adapted to the Declaration of Principles.

To show how the Principles could be incorporated in the near term, Net Dialogue, a joint project between the Harvard Berkman Center and Stanford Center for Internet and Society, constructed a web site for presentation during the open consultations of the UN Working Group on Internet Governance. The site is meant to demonstrate how a single web portal can consolidate information on Internet-related rule-making by intergovernmental bodies and offer online discussion tools, in order to make Internet governance more accessible to the public.

The Net Dialogue site categorizes information according to traditional governance areas – based on the theory that the same types of problems that governments have had to grapple with throughout history crop up in cyberspace. The site also provides

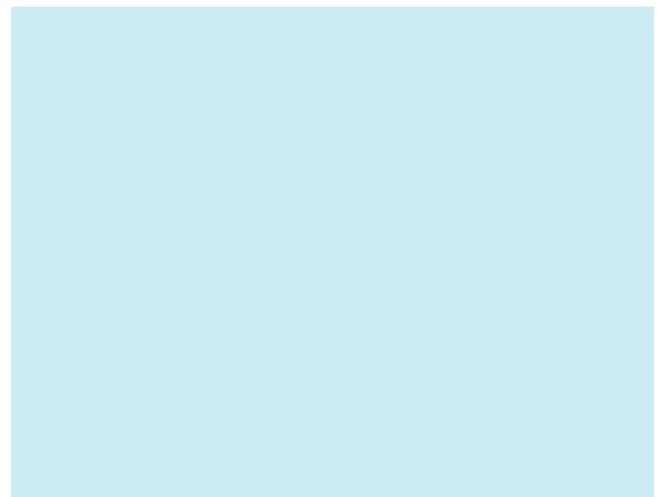


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overviews of organizations treating the Internet, and, for summaries of initiatives, it uses language directly from the organizations involved. To help the viewer find original documents, the site also links to official texts. In addition, to enable people to find further details, the site provides background information, indicating the drafting committee or pointing to the terms of reference for a specific initiative. Finally, this one-stop-shop portal features online discussion tools to show how the public can submit comments.

A forum established by the World Summit on the Information Society could easily take on this task in an official capacity. As part of its work, the forum could simply pull together what already exists through organizations' individual online coverage. Then, to garner public input, the site could offer a request for comment process to enable direct public participation in pending decisions. The site could employ simple tools like RSS feeds to facilitate the transmission of feedback directly to the specific committees involved in formulating new rules.

### **Anticipating the future**

Of course, by the time an Internet-related topic reaches an inter-governmental body for rulemaking, the technology is already well on its way to making an impact. In past years this delay was perhaps tolerable; however, today, and more so in the future, the pace of technological change will greatly outstrip the ability of rules to keep up with developments. For this reason, it is imperative that policymakers be equipped in advance with an understanding of the technology around the corner so that they may anticipate change and accommodate it.

Indeed, with technology developing at an exponential rate, the next ten years are projected to revolutionize the way people live. Web services and other oncoming advancements promise to make the Internet all pervasive in life, with electronic agents' continually exchanging and analysing information without individuals' even being aware of it. Moreover, whoever wields the power of quantum computing when it arrives (estimated by some to be in five to seven years) will have an enormous "first mover" advantage geopolitically in the networked world.

On the one hand, the information society is on the cusp of a renaissance, where high-performance computing is opening new scientific frontiers in fields like biotechnology and high-energy physics, and is awakening a love for the arts in an expanding universe of multimedia creations. On the other hand, the world risks decline, as information is consolidated and claimed, so that even people's location and spending patterns, or their communications with others, become restricted commodities. With these divergent possibilities, policies pertaining to the ownership and control of information will dramatically determine whether free society flourishes or withers.

In other words, there is an urgent need for policymakers to prepare for the future and not just focus on problems of the past. To do so, they need to maintain better dialogue with the technology community, and they need to employ procedures that are appropriate for this fast realm. More than ever before, the Declaration of Principles, espousing multilateralism, transparency, democracy, coordination, and multi-stakeholder input – coupled with a lean and nimble process – can help the networked world harness technological change for everyone's good.

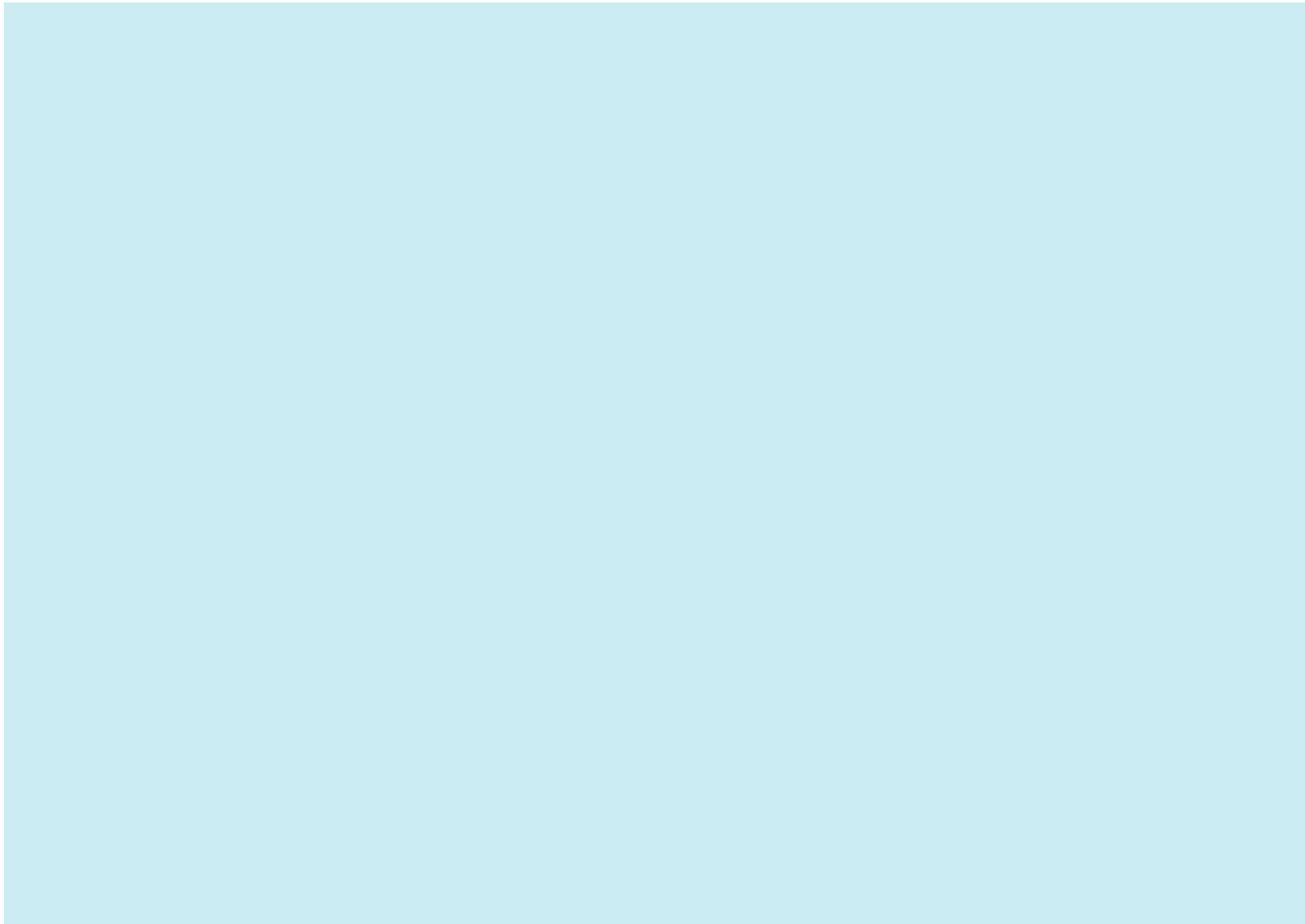


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