Australian Internet Governance Forum

Melbourne, 28-29 October 2024

Ideas for the evolution of the multistakeholder model

8 October 2024

> **Note: This document is written as an addendum to the main auIGF Position Paper and is intended as a "Food for Thought" paper.**

The Multistakeholder Model of internet governance has served the global community well over the past three decades. However, it is becoming clear that the existing processes and institutions involved in internet governance weren't designed to deal with the problems of today's internet, so we need to find ways to evolve them.

The WSIS+20 process provides a timely opportunity to consider ways in which the Multistakeholder Model (MSM) of internet governance could evolve. The need for some form of evolution is manifest in the many review processes currently underway. Reviews carried out by the [internet governance] organisations themselves have identified a wide range of issues that need to be addressed. These include:

1. Absence of coordination: The absence of a coordination and cooperation function between the different internet governance bodies can damage close working relationships and diminish the internet technical community's voice.
2. Lack of strategic direction: There is no clear strategic direction beyond maintaining and evolving the existing network, a situation that can encourage insularity and reduced understanding of how the modern internet is used.

3. Weak internal processes: Attempts at self-reform have led to dozens of reviews and hundreds of recommendations that organisations are struggling to address. At the same time, decision-making is taking longer, with delays becoming more frequent.
4. Weak participation: Despite a commitment to open participation, the organisations are too easily dominated by groups of dedicated or like-minded individuals able to resist change and limit effective participation by others.

The author(s) of this paper believe(s) that in time the forces straining against the old MSM could oblige Western countries to accept the need for change and to develop an evolutionary path for global internet governance. This evolutionary path could provide greater levels of transparency and accountability for the actions of ICANN, together with acceptance of some enhanced role for all MSM stakeholders in internet governance decision making.

Three broad approaches to the evolution of the MSM are considered in this document.

The first is a simple enhancement of the role of the existing Internet Governance Forum into a body which becomes more advisory. Following the WSIS+20 process one option could be to reshape the IGF to become a body which periodically develops proposals for improvements to existing processes and policies which are the responsibility of other existing bodies such as the IETF and ICANN.

This could be facilitated by the development of Memoranda of Understanding between the IGF and these other bodies.

A second approach would be to pursue the ideas which were developed in the United Nations High Level Panel on Digital Cooperation, which released its report The Age of Interdependence on 10 June 2020. The report invited all stakeholders to commit to a Declaration on Digital Interdependence:

"We declare our commitment to building on our shared values and collaborating in new ways to realise a vision of humanity's future in which affordable and accessible digital technologies are used to enable economic growth and social opportunity, lessen inequality, enhance peace and security, promote environmental sustainability, preserve human agency, advance human rights and meet human needs."

The panel was asked to look at ways digital technologies can assist in achieving all 17 goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The report highlights that around half of the world's population do not

have access to the Internet and recommends that every adult should have affordable access to digital networks by 2030.

The report urged the need for immediate action to find better ways of managing the governance of digital technologies through adopting new forms of global cooperation. Any new model should be agile, responsive and bring all stakeholders together so that discussions and decisions are well informed. It was also seen as needing to make the best of both worlds by using a mix of multilateralism and multistakeholderism.

While the panel itself did not determine a preferred new model, it presented three possible options for digital cooperation architectures to contribute to the ongoing discussion:
- Internet Governance Forum Plus
  - would work on policies and norms of direct interest to stakeholder communities
  - made up of an:
    - Advisory Group
    - Cooperation Accelerator
    - Policy Incubator
    - Observatory
    - Help Desk
    - Have a dedicated IGF Trust Fund
  - Distributed co-governance architecture
    - would extend the approach used by the Internet Engineering Task Force, Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) and others to design norms and policies to issues affecting the broader digital economy and society
- Digital Commons Architecture
  - governments, civil society, and business to work together to ensure digital technologies promote the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals
  - multistakeholder tracks would discuss emerging issues then come together at an annual meeting

A range of other approaches to this issue posit the development of entirely new structures. One example was that of the Tony Blair Institute in its 2022 paper, which proposed:

1. Establish a cross-community coordination and communication body to serve as the internet technical community's external access point, internal organisation and strategic home.
2. Establish an independent action review body to review significant decisions, actions and processes in order to identify improvements and direct community workload.

3. Assist the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) in identifying the gaps in current structures and framing issues so that internet organisations have a stake in their governance.
4. Reform participation structures and create pathways for new potential leaders, while also removing structures or positions that reinforce the status quo, to ensure more equitable access and influence at all levels.