IGC Pre-Event Report

## Event information and agenda

The IGC pre-event took place on 03 November 2020, as part of the global IGF 2020 agenda. The aim of the 1.5 hour event was to discuss the “public interest internet” and to identify characteristics of the public interest internet, challenges to realising it and opportunities or forums to advance it.

It was also the intention that the session gather perspectives to feed into the workshop “Will the Public Interest Internet Please Stand Up”?, scheduled for November 13 2020. The pre-event was attended by c. 40 people, many existing members of the IGC.

The meeting followed the following agenda:

* *Introductions and context*
* *Defining the public interest internet: What is the public interest internet?*
* *What are the main challenges? (Internal/external)*
* *Advocacy approach + opportunities*
* *Key take-aways + summary*

## Summary of discussions

### Defining the public interest internet: What is the public interest internet?

To begin with, participants discussed the characteristics of a public interest internet. One participant emphasised that one of the premises of the internet, in their understanding, is that it is global and in the public interest: in other words a centre for progress, global governance and innovation. Reference was also made to the importance of referring to it as a public good, constructive to democracy (instead of destructive). A number referenced the importance of availability, access and openness, including openness at all levels (design, use and the policy levels). The functionality of the internet as a space for e-governance and other public uses was also emphasised, and the importance of ensuring digital literacy and users being aware of their rights was also raised. A number of challenges to the public interest internet were also raised during this discussion, and are summarised in the following section below.

|  |
| --- |
| **Key points raised:** openness at all layers of the internet, internet as a public good, internet as an enabler of government and democracy, availability, accessibility, security/safety, progress, user rights are characteristics of a public interest internet. |

### What are the main challenges? (Internal/external)

Power imbalances in internet governance was raised as a key challenge to realising objectives of openness, availability and the governing the internet as a public good. In particular, private and government power over the digital domain has led to surveillance capitalism and to the securitisation of the digital space.  This creates challenges in holding private corporations accountable as they are also controlling the internet space through authoritarian practices. It was noted that internet fragmentation, the widespread surveillance of users and an internet of ‘private walled gardens’ is an increasing reality. This is linked to at least three different ideologies of how the internet should be governed (US, Europe and China) attempting to exert sovereignty.

Other issues raised related to openness of policy spaces and the lack of meaningful access for civil society, particularly in certain countries where only certain people are brought to the table and civil society is mistrusted.

It was stated that in order to overcome some of these challenges, a greater recognition of the value of civil society views, perspectives and voices in shaping IG at all levels is needed. In addition, there is a need to strengthen our capacity to effectively engage with such processes. We need to recognise that we’re not powerless and that there are alternative ways. Strengthening the IGF and supporting other forms of democratic engagement/strong inclusive, transparent, accessible and accountable internet governance processes and mechanisms is essential. It was noted that civil society is like a risk manager of international policies at an international and national level, while others pointed out that civil society is diverse.

Increased regulation of big tech companies and the role of regulatory authorities has to be clarified as well so that governments don’t take over that power themselves: the key is ensuring that user rights are protected and processes are transparent.

In addition, there is the importance of context and how different they are - civil society in Latin America has been trying to bring their perspectives to the risks posed by platforms in terms of exercising freedom of expression and the question remains as to whether Europe, playing a leading role as a global regulator, will consider the Latin American context.

|  |
| --- |
| **Key points raised:** Power imbalance and the domination of private sector tech platforms is a key challenge, authoritarian practices by governments is also of concern, the internet becoming a series of walled gardens dominated by competing ideological interests, ensuring capacity to engage and supporting inclusive and democratic mechanisms, existence of different contexts (e.g LatAm) and the importance of leading regulatory frameworks (like Europe) reflecting this. At the same time there are opportunities for civil society to get involved in public dialogue in order to ensure that the user interests and accountability to users is of primary importance. |

### Advocacy approach + opportunities

In the final part of the discussion, there was emphasis placed on the challenges faced by civil society and confusion about who civil society is and how its interpreted politically particularly in terms of legitimacy, especially that there is a misconception of what is civil society, especially in countries where governments are less democratic.

It was also pointed out that the latest book by Ronald Deibert, RESET, basically urges CS to form an accountability mechanism to oversee governments and tech companies. The possibility of CS creating such an accountability mechanism was raised (also see paper by Sherly Haristya: *https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/24701475.2020.1769892* ).

In terms of legitimacy it was suggested that there are several ways of addressing this: 1) recognising that civil society is the poorest of stakeholders - funding is a form of legitimacy 2) coalition building among like-minded, showing a thematic front on issues can help match “strength to strength” in policy spaces 3) plan long-term engagement and get involved early on 4) take time to cultivate expertise to get involved at the global level in policy engagement.

In addition, the importance of evidence-based research, documenting and making submissions, ownership of infrastructure and management of key resources (e.g community networks), diversified business models and identification of areas to engage and how they link to each other was identified as useful for civil society.

|  |
| --- |
| **Summary**: IGF is an important forum and strengthening it would be helpful, coalition building by civil society in particular and consideration of resources/funding, cultivating policy expertise, as well as early engagement can help to address legitimacy issues faced. Civil could also explore setting up independent civil society accountability mechanisms. It is important for business models to be diverse and for civil society to have “self-ownership” of infrastructure (community networks), provide evidence based research, documentation and submissions into policy discussions. |

### Wrap up and next steps

Sheetal and Bruna shared that they will send a report and summary of the session around, and Sheetal also shared updates on work that has been done by IGC members on the digital cooperation roadmap, in the effort to make it more inclusive. This includes: letter sent to the UNGA President; a joint position paper on the Tech Envoy appointment (forthcoming); engagement in the high level session on the Roadmap on Digital Cooperation and joint input (forthcoming); letter of support for the IGF MAG WG on Strengthening and Strategy Response to the Options Paper. Sheetal and Bruna will send around relevant links for the above to the list.

### Recommendations

* Identification of concrete mechanisms and the practicalities of effectively holding governments and corporations accountable for protecting the public interest
* Hold a roundtable about IGC with activists from its current and early days for us to discuss challenges and paths for CS engagement in IG Processes (IGC Past, present and Future)
* Identify where engagement is needed and how different areas and spaces of internet governance and infrastructure connect