Background paper | Who is being left behind by multistakeholderism and Internet governance?

The debate on Internet governance through a multistakeholder approach has already been widely discussed and encouraged, since it is well known that discussions regarding the Internet, especially in a globalized world, cannot be limited to the governmental sphere. It does need to consider different sectors and actors in society. However, despite positive outcomes of the current Internet governance structure, the question whether the current scenario is encompassing the whole diversity of groups affected by digital policies still remains.

It is true that a lot of debate about Internet governance is being carried out. Nonetheless, it is noticed that such discussions are often led by a very specialized group of people. While large companies are increasingly engaged in governance and handling new technologies, populations directly affected by them do not participate in the debate about their implementation. For example, Elon Musk's interest[1] in implementing new technologies in the Amazon is cited, disregarding not only the tools that are already used in the region but also the context of local, riverside, and indigenous populations that will be affected.

A limited understanding of technological issues by most people - e.g. the architecture of the Internet, its principles and guidelines, as well as its governance - is a challenge that affects regulation efforts, especially in the Global South. This sort of exclusion persists insofar as, sometimes, organizations, social movements and other human rights protection entities are not necessarily engaged in digital themes.

In reality, traditional human rights organizations (CSOs) lack specific and technical training on digital rights, even though they make daily use of cyberspace to carry out their activities. This problem has become more expressive after Internet governance came to prominence in 2020 with the Covid-19 pandemic. Surveillance and tracking devices have been developed and deployed in various countries around the world, both democratic and less so[2]. Regulation, co-regulation and self-regulation of the digital world have flourished and concerns have been raised about inequalities of access, digital literacy, and adequate infrastructure. The benefits and pitfalls of technology were exposed as different stakeholders grappled with the consequences of social distancing. The relevance of digital rights and freedoms has emerged for many in 2020, as individuals, organizations, states, and the private sector witnessed how the constraints of the physical world expand and seek shelter in digital connections.

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[1]https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/spacex-to-provide-internet-for-19k-rural-schools-in-brazil-monitoring-amazon/2593473
[2]https://www.article19.org/resources/covid-19-states-use-of-digital-surveillance-technologies-to-fight-pandemic-must-respect-human-rights/

In 2022, there is still a need to deal with the expansion of the use of these technologies, which have been inserted in certain environments and contexts without a broad debate or adequate preparation for their implementation. It is usually mentioned, for example, the use of new technological tools in Education, which involves the sensitive data of children around the world[3]. This concern does not, however, figure extensively in governance debates.

Other issues that should be pointed out relate to electoral and political debates[4]. Although they are very much linked to the behavior of the Internet and social media, rarely political agents seem to effectively enter into debates on Internet governance. The lack of enhancement makes it difficult to exercise and debate such democratic issues in the digital sphere.

Problems of lack of participation also relate to global entities. The concern with issues that affect the whole world, such as climate change, overheating in the region of India, desertification in Africa, and floods in Latin America, nowadays count on assistance and dissemination of information through the Internet. Human rights organizations and movements use it both for research and as a means to provide assistance and find material, to publicly raise awareness about their agendas. Despite being inseparable from the exercise of human rights, the governance of the Internet is not necessarily a priority for those agents, nor does it rely on their opinion for its construction.

Bearing in mind such a complex and urgent scenario, the session aims to gather insights, suggestions, and best practices in order to think how to foster participation and democratization of Internet governance, improving the multistakeholder scenario that is already placed. At the same time, this conversation also represents the continuity of a debate that has begun in a workshop at RightsCon 2022, where issues such as indigenous languages and infrastructure, people's empowerment and knowledge on digital rights themes, and the idea of building a multicultural and decolonized Internet were approached.

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[3] https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2021/07/childrens-right-privacy-digital-age-must-be-improved
[4]https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/brazils-bolsonaro-escalates-rhetoric-over-electoral-fraud-2021-07-29/