EUROPEAN COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS
ecfr.eu

⬤ European Power

Multilateral internet: Unplugged and somewhat slightly dazed

To prevent the worldwide web from splintering into regional nets, the EU should safeguard the principles of the current internet governance model while becoming more open to inclusive reform

[Julian Ringhof](#) 🐦
Policy Fellow

Commentary · 7 June 2023 · 6 minute read

Five days after Russia's all-out invasion, Ukraine's deputy prime minister, Mykhailo Fedorov, requested that the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), one of the institutions that manages the fundamental workings of the internet, disconnect Russia from the global network. ICANN quickly dismissed the request, citing its obligation to remain neutral and ensure that the functioning of the internet is not politicised. Even so, the episode did nothing to assuage longstanding concerns about a potential splintering of the global internet along geopolitical fault lines.

The European Union has committed to safeguard an open, free, and global internet – not least due to the crucial role such a web plays in the promotion of human rights. But the internet comprises several layers: including its physical infrastructure layer, such as cables and mobile networks; its logical layer, or the technical protocols and standards that facilitate the transfer of data; and its content layer, where those data become visible to internet users. The logical layer is currently the only "global and open" segment of the internet: physical infrastructure does not yet extend to a truly worldwide web, and governments across the globe limit the free flow of data on the content level, often for privacy or security reasons.

The EU is right to address unnecessary limitations to internet openness that stem from a lack of infrastructure or illegitimate restrictions at the content level. However, Europeans should also view the protection of the logical layer as a matter of the utmost importance. Political

pressure is mounting – largely from outside the West – on organisations such as ICANN. And multilateral organisations traditionally not involved in internet governance are chiming in to shape the internet's future, further politicising its technical core.

Multistakeholder governance and the liberal-democratic internet

The unity of the logical layer is bound up with the internet's unique governance model. The EU is committed to this system, wherein several organisations including ICANN, the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), and the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) oversee the internet's technical architecture. This model limits direct national or multilateral intervention in the internet's standards and protocol development processes.

The basic technical architecture of the global internet: physical layer, logical layer, content layer

On **the content layer,** the data transported across the physical infrastructure layer – according to the protocols and standards of the logical layer – become visible to users, including web pages, emails, or videos in mobile apps. The content layer is not truly global. Certain content cannot flow freely across the global internet as governments and companies put limits in place, often for privacy, security, or copyright reasons.

The logical layer contains the technical protocols and standards that facilitate the transfer of data across the physical infrastructure and to devices connected to the internet. These protocols and standards are developed by various multistakeholder organisations including ICANN, IETF, and W3C. The most important protocols and standards include the Domain Name System (DNS) administered by ICANN, the Transmission Control Protocol (TCP) and the Internet Protocol (IP) maintained by IETF, and the Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) developed by W3C. The logical layer remains truly global, as the standards comprising the core technical architecture of the internet are the same around the world.

The physical layer consists of the physical infrastructure through which internet data travels. This includes terrestrial and submarine cables, satellites, broadband infrastructure, and wireless networks. The physical layer is not truly global: 400 million people have no access to broadband internet, and a further 2.3 billion people lack the means to connect to the infrastructure in place.

In most of these 'multistakeholder' organisations, decision-makers are largely Western

private sector actors and technical communities. They have the narrow task of neutrally facilitating the interoperability, resilience, and growth of the internet. Yet, the standards and protocols they develop often inherently reflect preferences for privacy, security, and openness, in line with liberal and democratic world views.

EU policymakers are understandably keen to uphold the principles reflected in this bias. Beyond that, in their view, overt government influence in technical internet governance would pave the way for drastically enhanced state surveillance and control over data flows. They also argue that the continued evolution of the internet requires agile protocol and standards development, for which traditional multilateralism is not well suited.

There is, of course, room for improvement in the current model: internet governance organisations tend to be dominated by the US private sector; technical insufficiencies cause problems too – including persistent insecurities in the internet's addressing system and the protocol for coordinating data traffic across the global net. Moreover, the organisations do not always pay sufficient regard to the political and societal implications of their decisions.

Non-Western countries have for many years sought ways to increase their influence over these decisions, albeit with little success. Processes at internet governance organisations are generally open, but barriers for meaningful participation are high because of the resources, technical expertise, and interpersonal connections required. Moreover, decisions in these organisations are usually made by consensus, which clearly favours incumbents.

Challenges to 'multi-stakeholderism'

To gain greater sway, a group of countries including China, Russia, and the Gulf states have sought to shift internet governance away from multistakeholder organisations to multilateral bodies. They have centred these efforts around the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), an intergovernmental organisation within the United Nations framework. Historically, the ITU was responsible for telecommunications standards development and infrastructure, not internet governance. But, since governments take decisions on ITU standardisation with equal voting rights for all, those committed to a more state-centric model have pursued this approach – though their strategies, means, and capacities greatly differ.

Russia, with its limited technological and economic influence, primarily seeks to expand internet control domestically, delegitimise the multistakeholder internet governance system, and promote a more state-powered system. Although Russia also pushes for a broadened ITU mandate, it has become more isolated because of its war of aggression against Ukraine. A Russian candidate in the 2022 ITU secretary-general election was heavily defeated by his US

opponent.

China is better positioned to reshape the internet's logical layer. Xi Jinping's government seeks not only to export its "great firewall" approach, but also to change global internet governance, standards, and protocols to further facilitate state control. The Chinese government invests huge resources to increase its influence in internet governance organisations, as well as promote a bigger role for the ITU. What is more, Beijing is successfully pushing its own technology standards through bilateral cooperation and digital infrastructure development worldwide.

Beijing uses the Western bias in multistakeholder organisations as part of its narrative to win support for these intrusive changes. Chinese leaders also claim that the current architecture of the logical layer is unsuitable for new technologies, such as self-driving cars or the internet of things. They leverage their political and economic ties to sway leaders to vote for their proposals, even though, as some Western officials express in private, these states often lack the expertise to fully comprehend the far-reaching implications of the changes.

A multi-layered approach for the multi-layered internet

Yet, a sudden systemic rupture of the logical layer is highly unlikely, due to the advanced international integration and significant economic benefits of the internet's global and open technical architecture. Internet companies are hesitant of adopting new – politically motivated – standards that offer no economic or technical advantages, further militating against fundamental change.

But fragmentation is a continuous technical, economic, and political process. As long as geopolitical tensions continue to grow, and persistent technical issues and connectivity gaps remain, the internet will risk a slow but steady splintering. And as long as countries lack the capacities to effectively address genuine issues on the internet's content layer – such as the spread of disinformation or illegal content – proposals will remain attractive for more state-centric internet governance or expanded domestic interference below the content layer.

It is not sustainable for the EU to continually block non-Western proposals for changes to the internet's governance or architecture by simply leveraging the consensus system. A perception in non-Western countries that the West is unwilling to truly incorporate their positions and concerns will only accelerate the emergence of alternative governance systems

and standards, fuelling internet fragmentation. Instead, the EU needs to implement a more proactive, targeted, and multifaceted approach, combined with greater bilateral engagement.

Firstly, to address some technical issues and preserve its credibility, the EU should mandate within the bloc the use of secure standards and new protocols that multistakeholder organisations have agreed upon. It should also promote these internationally. At the same time, the EU should refrain from political interference at the logical layer itself to avoid setting precedents.

Secondly, policymakers should aim for more European participation in international internet governance, standard setting, and multilateral institutions. This should involve representatives from EU institutions, member state governments, the private sector, and civil society. At the ITU, for example, the EU often lacks representation and depends on the United Kingdom to shape the agenda and position of the European regional group, not always in line with EU interests.

Thirdly, the EU needs to develop a compelling narrative for its vision of internet governance. This should focus on digital inclusion and development, particularly in less developed countries. Europeans need to clearly emphasise that an open internet and standards that reduce the risk of lasting one-sided technological dependencies contribute to countries' political, economic, and technological sovereignty.

Finally, the EU and member states should underpin this narrative with concrete actions in multilateral and multistakeholder bodies, as well as through bilateral engagement. Europeans should become more open to reform aimed at improving cooperation in multistakeholder organisations cooperation and facilitating greater inclusion in internet governance, especially that of countries in the global south. One key action in this area could be to work towards better compatibility of the internet for non-Latin language scripts (including Arabic, Chinese, Cyrillic, and Hindi) to underscore the EU's commitment to this inclusivity.

At the same time, the EU should support countries in implementing sound regulation at the content layer through capacity building – for example to better protect personal data online, limit the spread of disinformation and harmful content, and improve cybersecurity. This will reduce the risk of governments moving to farther-reaching approaches to control the domestic internet below that layer, and thereby contribute to secure openness at the logical layer.

At the infrastructure layer, the EU should incorporate internet governance diplomacy into bilateral development projects within its Global Gateway connectivity initiative. The approach countries take to internet governance nationally and internationally is closely linked to how and with whom the underlying physical infrastructure is built. When the EU

engages with third countries on digital development and internet governance, it should view local civil society and technical communities – which often align with the EU's human-centric approach – as natural partners to promote an open internet.

The next two years will be crucial. In 2024, at the UN Summit of the Future, members are set to agree on a Global Digital Compact that "outlines shared principles for an open, free and secure digital future for all". In 2025, the ITU's World Summit on the Information Society will take place to discuss nothing less than the future of the internet governance ecosystem. The EU urgently needs a coherent approach to internet diplomacy that encompasses all three layers of the web. Only then can it help ensure that the internet's architecture remains global, open, and human-rights enabling for as long as possible.

Shapes of multilateralisms collection

Anthony Dworkin, Rafael Loss, Jana Puglierin (eds.)

This collection of nine insightful essays illuminates the strategies employed to advance European interests and values within the evolving global polity of overlapping cooperative frameworks.

Browse the full collection