



Selected Papers of #AoIR2017:
The 18th Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Tartu, Estonia / 18-21 October 2017

PERFORMING INTERNET GOVERNANCE: THE CASE STUDY OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN THE INTERNET GOVERNANCE FORUM

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Theoretical Background

From participation in global campaigns concerning digital rights to civil society initiatives aimed at educating people about their rights, activists' voices are being heard today, more than ever, regarding internet policy. This study focuses on one space in which these activists take part in discussing internet policy issues – the Internet Governance Forum (IGF). The IGF is a multi-stakeholder forum that has convened annually since 2006 to discuss the norms and principles of internet governance.

Three kinds of politics shape the nature of the IGF (Mueller, 2010): the politics of representation (the people who participate at the IGF), of agenda setting (the topics to be discussed at the IGF), and of principles (norms and values within the IGF). Without diminishing the power of the two latter aspects, the issue of representation appears to be the crucial one, since it is the participants who eventually set the tone of the agenda and the principles of the IGF. Thus, the study aims to shed light on the issue by analyzing the case study of youth participation in the IGF.

In recent years, the perspective on children and young people has shifted from seeing them as vulnerable societal sectors who need protection to considering them active and knowledgeable social actors who can contribute to society and whose voices should be heard in all matters that affect them (Livingstone, 2002; Dahlgren, 2007). Furthermore, today, youth are even serving as members of boards of directors and key advisory groups (Zeldin & Macneil, 2006). Looking at the IGF, due to financial, political, and educational limitations (Carr, 2015; Levenson, 2012), minority groups, including youth, are often excluded from participating. Ever since its establishment in 2006, youth have struggled to participate and several institutionalized efforts have been made to get them involved. The most notable was the creation of the Youth Coalition for Internet

Governance (YCIG) in 2009 to function as a dynamic coalition aiming to promote the participation of young people in the forum. However, the effectiveness of these efforts, including the YCIG, is still unclear. Thus, in order to assess these youth related initiatives, and furthermore to analyze the political processes that are meant to enable young people to construct youth representation at the IGF, this study asks, what are the characteristics of youth participation at the IGF?

Methodology

To answer this question, we used several research methods triangulated to produce a thick description of youth activities within the IGF: content analysis of all youth-related materials from IGF meetings (n=35 documents), in-depth interviews with key activists who participated in youth activities in the IGF (n=5), and participatory observation conducted at IGF Mexico during December of 2016. The analysis of these materials yielded three major themes that will be presented as follows: (1) the vision of youth participation in the IGF, (2) the difficulties youth encounter in participating in the IGF, and (3) the future of youth participation in the IGF.

Results

The vision – According to the YCIG declaration, the main justification for including youth at the IGF relies on the concept that "the internet is a world of the young". This statement was repeated in most YCIG meetings and was interpreted by YCIG members in two ways. First, that today, youth is the largest group of internet users, and second, that youth have more experience in internet-related issues, thus they should have a say in internet governance. While both arguments are problematic (because youth is a transitory stage and not only young people have experience with the internet), it provided young people with the legitimacy they needed to participate at IGF as an institutionalized entity. Moreover, both arguments rely on the underlying assumption that youth can be considered a global social actor with unique characteristics. In addition, the YCIG declaration also states two characteristics of ideal youth participation. First, "young people's involvement should be confined not only to youth-related issues," but also to other aspects of internet governance. By raising this argument, the youth aim to brand themselves as capable social actors, just like adults. Second, "The involvement of young people must not [sic] genuine, not tokenistic," meaning that only authentic voices of young people should be heard in this framework.

The difficulties – There are two main difficulties youth encounter at the IGF that might diminish their ability to express their authentic voices. First, since young people are by default less financially stable, they need financial assistance to physically participate in the IGF, which usually takes place in remote and exotic locations. One way of doing so is to be affiliated with other powerful stakeholders (e.g., civil society organizations, governments, or internet companies); but this affiliation sometimes comes with strings attached and furthermore may transform these young people into passive participants. Second, in order to engage successfully at the IGF, young people need to go through an extensive process of capacity building. Nevertheless, this kind of guidance currently hardly exists even within the framework of YCIG

The future – Three trends will influence the future of youth involvement within the IGF: (1) The strengthening of traditional geo-political forces within the IGF, manifested in the rise of national IGF youth initiatives and the identity of the YCIG steering committee delegates, who for the first time will be determined by their geo-political affiliation (2) The process of professionalization youth representatives go through within the IGF leads them (even unconsciously) to modify their behavior, resulting in adultism; and (3) The dissolution of youth as a global actor due to the lack of any strong leadership that can unite all the different youth initiatives. The upshot of these three trends is that while youth will continue to participate in the IGF, the vision of global and authentic youth participation at IGF envisioned by the YCIG founders is far from becoming reality.

Conclusions

The study suggests that despite the potential for an independent and innovative youth involvement at IGF, the existing limitations transform young people from genuine political participants into mere performative representatives whose sole function is to play the role of young representatives at IGF. Furthermore, the findings of this study also reflect how IGF became a performative sphere in which internet governance is presented and ritualized but not necessarily created. While this outcome differs from the ideal vision of IGF, we nevertheless conclude by highlighting the socio-political importance of maintaining IGF as a performative space of internet governance.

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