

# The Origins of the IGF

## A Tale of Contingencies and Competing Claims to Power

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# BIG Questions – small Study

**How do we account for institutional change in Internet Governance?**

- Can we identify inherent patterns or logics that drive these processes?

**If battles in IG are engines of institutional change, how do we conceptualize and interpret them?**

# Common Approaches to Institutional Change in IG Literature

- **Functional approach**
  - Coordination problems require institution building (CIR)
  - Interest-driven battles over distributional effects (resources, power)
- **Normative approach**
  - Competing ideas about legitimate orders/forms of policy-making, external shocks/entrepreneurs
- **Constructivist approach**
  - Competing ways of sense-making (*problematization* instead of given problems)

# (Few) Explanations for Founding of IGF

- **Forum shifting** (...) that could not do harm to those interested in preserving the status quo (Mueller 2010: 78)
- **Compromise** accommodating a range of views, due to a bureaucratic need (Epstein 2013: 146)
- A **diplomatic compromise**, the beauty of which is its creative ambiguity that allows everybody to satisfy their own wishes (Kummer 2007\*)
- The **only agreement possible** was to set up an 'IGF' with no regulatory teeth (Flyverbom 2013: 144)
- "**Low-hanging fruit**" (Kleinwächter)

# Contingency: Openness and Uncertainty of the Situation

**Proposition 1:** The IGF was an unlikely event; could as well not have happened

## Empirical evidence

- Brainchild of civil society, the weakest actor at WSIS
- Founding an organization was not on the WSIS agenda before summer 2005
- US and I\* organizations were explicitly against it
- WGIG questionnaire on forum idea did not yield euphoric response
- Forum expected to extend debate on IG (instead of solving it)

**Proposition 2:** WSIS created *semantic conditions* that morphed IGF into a "beautiful" compromise

# Institutional Theory: Organizational Fields

- Community of organizations whose participants take one another into account
- Constitute *recognized areas of institutional life*
- Often shaped by manifest controversies
- **Sites of production and sense-making work**
  - problematize issues
  - Produce "**oppositions**" - enabled by shared understandings
  - specify corridors of institutional change: "space of the possibles"/ "universes of the thinkable"
  - With unpredictable/contingent outcomes

*Wooten & Hoffman 2008; Fligstein & McAdam 2011; McAdam and Scott 2005;  
DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Bourdieu 1996, 1991*

# WSIS as an Organizational Field

- *Problematized* distribution, constitution and scope of power in Internet Governance
- Created *Oppositions* between:
  - technical and political authority (public policies in IG?)
  - Private and public authority
- *Reframes IG* in between these "opposites" by acknowledging
  - Cross-cutting public policy issues linked to (broad) IG
  - Multi-stakeholder category in addition to public/private dichotomy
  - Affected global community asking for a voice
- IGF becomes a *thinkable outcome* reflecting a changing understanding of "what is going on in the field"

# Conclusion

Concept of organizational fields helps to de-naturalize the origins of the IGF:

- Not a given but an outcome of a contingent process
- By-product of local battles rather than the result of a master plan
- Oppositions re allocation of power in IG = driving force re-defining the "space of the possibles"
- "Multi-stakeholder" & "policy dialogue" = semantic products of meaning making, making IGF thinkable
- Creating the IGF did not solve any problems or controversies but transformed them
- IGF: battle over the control of *discursive power*