

The public voice in internet governance

James Fishkin and Max Senges describe how an innovative democratic mechanism was used at the global Internet Governance Forum to revive Athenian democracy and draw up plans for extending internet access to the next billion users.

The internet is constantly transforming itself, touching almost everyone and every institution on the planet. One of the great unheralded challenges is how it might be governed in the interests of all who are affected by it. Currently, some decisions are multilateral, involving negotiations between countries. Some are left to international institutions and some to technical communities. But there is a growing trend to try and involve all the relevant parties –countries, corporations, international agencies, civil society, academia and expert communities spread around the world, including the global south and the global north. This is called “multistakeholder governance” and has been supported by international declarations from the United Nations (UN) and other groups. The key question is, how could such inclusive processes work? How could we bring transborder democratic values and practices to a global digital environment?

One venue for experimentation is the UN-sponsored Internet Governance Forum (IGF) which gathers many of the world’s internet experts once a year. In 2015, it was held in João Pessoa, Brazil, where it was the scene for applying a democratic mechanism called Deliberative Polling to internet governance issues. It was implemented by a team from Stanford University that included Larry Diamond and Eileen Donahoe.

Deliberative Polling uses modern social science to bring to life an ancient political life form — the randomly selected microcosm of a population that deliberates. In ancient Athens the “Council of 500” was selected by lot and set the agenda for what could be voted on in the Assembly. Today’s version brings together a stratified random sample to engage in dialogue and register opinions in confidential questionnaires before and after deliberation. The opinion changes show the effect of deliberation, when people discuss the issues together, weigh arguments for and against each

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policy option, and become more informed. We learn what arguments have weight with the public once people really focus on the issue.

The idea is to apply a version of Athenian democracy (deliberation by a sample chosen by lottery) to the modern problem of internet governance. This contemporary democratic instrument has been [applied](#) in 24 countries around the world, usually with random samples of the mass public for policy choice.

This pilot application focused on the topic of how to increase internet access for the world's next billion users who are coming online mostly from developing countries. First the team identified policy options and developed briefing materials to explain the advantages and trade-offs posed by each proposal. These briefing materials were then vetted for balance and accuracy by the project's advisory board and subject matter experts representing different points of view. Then, a stratified random sample of the IGF community from around the world was given the questionnaire. These participants were invited to deliberate together for several hours and then to answer the same questionnaire again afterwards.

The results were encouraging. The deliberators were representative in both demographics and policy attitudes (when compared to those who took the survey but did not participate). There were significant changes in policy attitudes and significant gains in knowledge. There was also evidence of equal participation between those from the global north and the global south, and between women and men. The pilot shows that Deliberative Polling can enhance multi-stakeholder internet governance by identifying specific results arrived at under good conditions.

The deliberators considered 13 specific policy proposals for increasing access for the next billion users. All the proposals were rated on the same scale so the answers provide a ranking from top to bottom. At the top were two proposals to "facilitate free public access" at schools or libraries, and also by local businesses and user communities. At the bottom of the list were two proposals to provide free access to the internet. Zero rating, i.e. not charging users for accessing a number of specific website and applications, would provide access only to selected parts of the internet such as Facebook and certain other services. Deliberators felt that even those in the poorest countries should have access to the whole internet and not just parts of it. The other proposal, equal rating, would provide access only in exchange for viewing advertising. Deliberators felt this was coercive. The discussions of these low-ranking proposals show a real concern for net neutrality and the need to provide access to the whole internet on the same basis for everyone, even in the poorest countries.

The participants came from all parts of the globe and very different kinds of institutions—corporations, governments, civil society, international institutions. Our bet was that they would deliberate as netizens – citizens not just from a given country or institution, but in effect citizens of the internet who after considering the merits of the issues would tell us in confidential questionnaires what they really thought should be done. Was this unrealistically utopian? Our pilot

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with its dusted off ancient approach to democracy suggests otherwise. It demonstrates a democratic method for global input on the internet of the future.

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