PNIF webinar 1 - *Avoiding Internet Fragmentation, still a matter of concern in 2024?*
19 June 2024

Summary of the discussion

Introduction

1. The IGF Policy Network on Internet Fragmentation (PNIF) was set up in 2022 to address the question of Internet Fragmentation, to raise awareness of actions and measures that risk fragmenting the Internet, and to facilitate discussion on what could be done to avoid such fragmentation.

2. The PNIF developed its *PNIF Framework for Discussing Internet Fragmentation* in its [2022 report](#) and further unpacked the three dimensions of the framework *fragmentation of the Internet user experience*, *fragmentation of the Internet's technical layer*, and *fragmentation of Internet governance and coordination*, in the [2023 report](#).

3. The aim of the webinar is to discuss a work plan for the PNIF in 2024 and to have an exchange on whether and how the PNIF can contribute to Internet governance processes, such as the preparations for the GDC & Summit of the Future, the WSIS+20 or be a space for discussion on fragmentation.

Avoiding Internet Fragmentation, still a matter of concern in 2024?

4. In 2021, the UN Secretary General's *Our Common Agenda* called for a Global Digital Compact that may include '*reaffirming the fundamental commitment to connecting the unconnected;* *avoiding fragmentation of the Internet;* *providing people with options as to how their data is used; application of human rights online; and promoting a trustworthy Internet by introducing accountability criteria for discrimination and misleading content.*' (art 93). More recent IG discussions and documents mention fragmentation in varied contexts (some examples on page 4 of the [slide deck](#)).

5. The term 'fragmentation' means different things to different people, and often lacks a clear, shared understanding. The repeated, undefined use of the term 'fragmentation' empties it of meaning, making it a flexible term that can easily be manipulated for various purposes. The focus should be on what one wants to achieve by avoiding fragmentation. An excessive emphasis on terminology may distract from understanding and achieving goals.

6. A positive framing that emphasises the Internet as a public good that should be equally available to everyone may gain more traction than the negative, defensive narrative on avoiding fragmentation. Moreover, in regions where providing Internet access is still the priority, fragmentation is often considered a secondary concern. Calling for an open, free,

global, interoperable Internet is another way to frame the issue more positively, focusing on what one wants to achieve rather than what one wants to avoid.

7. Technically, the Internet has always been fragmented to some extent because of its system design. It is a network of interconnected networks and functions based on voluntary standards.

8. There is increasing fragmentation at the policy and regulatory levels, as different governments pursue public policy objectives, economic, and social interests. The proliferation of uncoordinated policy approaches to the Internet, related emerging technologies and AI - some with extraterritorial or unintended consequences - poses challenges to the future of the network.

9. Commercial decisions can also contribute to Internet fragmentation and should be considered. The community should focus on preventing fragmentation at various layers, even if international Internet governance discussions and documents focus on only one or a small set of issues.

10. Inclusive and comprehensive approaches to social media governance and data management can help to assure access to unbiased data and information online.

11. The economic benefits of an unfragmented internet should be emphasised, however it is difficult to translate the benefits into concrete indicators. The broader debate on fragmentation must include these economic considerations. On the other hand, Internet "imperialism" causes concern among governments in the global South, and regulations are seen as a way for countries to benefit economically from internet activities.

12. Overall, discussants and intervening participants agreed that avoiding Internet fragmentation is still a matter of concern in 2024.

How can the PNIF effectively contribute to ongoing dialogues on fragmentation?

13. The PNIF should continue to contribute to a holistic framing and understanding of fragmentation and collect and provide empirical information on the impact of fragmentation from different perspectives, such as the human rights impact of network fragmentation, shutdowns or inequitable access, or the economic impact of data flow management.

14. The PNIF could collect existing research and datasets on the impact of fragmentation (e.g. OECD, NTIA reports) and create the basis for a coherent data set or analytical framework that illustrates the impact of different types of fragmentation on human rights, economy and trade, etc. As part of this exercise the PNIF could highlight what data is outdated and would need an update.

15. The PNIF can help to establish a structured discourse among governments on what fragmentation means, what policies unintentionally risk to cause fragmentation, and on how to limit or mitigate potential damage.

16. To support such a dialogue, the PNIF can undertake empirical work to document government actions and their impact on Internet functionality. This would clarify the scope and impact of fragmentation and can form the basis for informed Internet governance discussions and informed future policymaking. Such an Inventory of actions and policies that lead to unintended consequences could help governments understand and mitigate the effects of their decisions, and help to improve future policymaking. This work would provide useful information for the WSIS+20 review and global, regional and national processes.

17. The work on the impact of fragmentation could be complemented with an inventory of positive measures, constructive alternatives and data showing the value of an unfragmented Internet. Simply diminishing government actions as misunderstanding the functioning of the Internet will gain no traction, as governments have a legitimate interest in ensuring their infrastructure's functionality and national security.

18. The PNIF work should inform Internet governance discussions. However, the GDC negotiations are too far in the process. The PNIF should look further ahead, contributing to WSIS+20 and SDG discussions and other.

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