IGF 2023
Policy Network on Internet Fragmentation
(PNIF)

Summary

Internet fragmentation is a complex issue. The many views, diverse opinions, different conceptualisations and definitions of what is and what is not internet fragmentation and what should be avoided or addressed - including in the context of the UNSG's "*Our Common Agenda*" - can hinder an open and inclusive dialogue, and the identification of common guidelines and principles.

The IGF Policy Network on Internet Fragmentation (PNIF) raises awareness of - intended or unintended - effects of technical, policy, legal and regulatory actions on the basic features of the internet as an open, interconnected and interoperable network of networks, and provides a framework for a multistakeholder dialogue on what risks and causes of fragmentation should be addressed and how. The PNIF discussions and output document contribute to providing increased clarity about the diverse causes of fragmentation, their interrelation, impacts, and a common understanding of when fragmentation is most harmful and should be avoided. As such, the PNIF findings can feed into discussion between policymakers and stakeholders, in particular, but not exclusively in the framework of the Global Digital Compact (GDC) and Summit of the Future process.

The "*PNIF Framework for Discussing Internet Fragmentation*" which the PNIF constructed from community discussions in 2022 conceptualises three key dimensions of fragmentation:
- *Fragmentation of the Internet user experience,*
- *Fragmentation of the Internet's technical layer,* and
- *Fragmentation of Internet governance and coordination.*

Political, commercial and technical developments may have an impact on one or more of the dimensions of internet fragmentation, while the framework as well captures potential relationships and overlap between the dimensions.

In 2023 the three key dimensions of the Framework were further unpacked by separate work streams that worked on
- Identification and prioritisation: Identify which types of fragmentation and related actions pose the highest risks and should be addressed or avoided, and,
- Prevention and addressing: Define practices, guidelines and principles to prevent or address fragmentation.

Three intersessional webinars gathered community views to further unpack fragmentation and inform drafting teams that then compiled a PNIF discussion paper that was published on 15 September to serve as input for the IGF 2023 annual meeting in Kyoto. The thematic webinars focused on Internet governance and coordination (PNIF webinar 1, 16 May), Internet user experience (PNIF webinar 2, 24 May), and the Internet technical layer (PNIF webinar 3, 27 June).

Feedback received on the PNIF discussion paper and the exchanges at the (10 October, Kyoto) helped to shape the PNIF output for 2023.

Throughout the PNIF activities recommendations for addressing internet fragmentation emerged.

Recommendations for addressing fragmentation of Internet governance and coordination.
1. Do not introduce duplication within the internet governance landscape.
2. But, improve coordination between existing internet governance bodies.
3. To avoid siloed public policy discussions regarding Internet governance, all Internet governance bodies must be fully inclusive to stakeholders and enable meaningful multistakeholder participation.
4. Existing global Internet governance bodies should engage with national governments to promote inclusive policymaking.

Recommendations for addressing fragmentation of the Internet technical layer.
1. Recognise that there are critical properties of the internet/public core that require multistakeholder protection.
2. Measure to monitor the extent and nature of different types of technical fragmentation as the internet evolves.
3. Critically assess and avoid technical proposals (in standards and technology development) which reduce interoperability or otherwise would take the Internet away from the properties and design principles which have led to its success.
4. Protect the multistakeholder approach.
5. Promote inclusive policymaking that integrates consideration of technical expertise/impact of policies on critical properties of the internet, while protecting innovation.

Recommendations for addressing fragmentation of the Internet user experience.

Adherence to the following *principles* will contribute to addressing identified harms resulting from fragmentary behaviours:
1. *Equality principle* - Every user should - as a starting point - be able to access what was intended to be made publicly available, in the same manner.
2. Enhancement principle - Measures to enhance the user experience by making it more relevant, meaningful, understandable, secure, or accessible, and that are requested by the users themselves (...) should not be considered as "bad" fragmentation that contravenes the first principle, notwithstanding the potential effects on uniformity.
3. *Impact assessment principle* - Any measure - whether by governmental, private sector, or technical actors - that may have a directly intended effect (...) to diminish or render ineffectual the first principle, must be evaluated prior to its introduction or implementation to ensure that such a measure is proportionate, addresses a legitimate harm, is respecting of human rights, and follows democratic procedures with multi-stakeholder involvement.
4. *Harmonisation principle* - Fragmentation that may be driven by diverse national regulatory or legislative approaches to protect the human rights or legitimate interests (...) can be avoided through cooperation and multilateral instruments (informed by multi-stakeholder

consultation) that set globally-applicable baseline standards and protections of those rights and interests, (...).

5. *Free Choice principle* - No user of the Internet should be coerced or unduly incentivised to use a particular platform, technology, or service provider - especially in order to provide or access content, resources, applications or services on the Internet that would not have otherwise been made possible or available to them (...). Users should be able to choose the applications, instruments and service providers that they use and should not be subject to unfair conditions deriving from dominant market positions, lock-in and network effects.

The recommendations are not carved in stone but intended as valuable input for further stakeholder discussion. The report identified areas for further research, and the identification of best practices. Testing and socialisation of the recommendations and practices in an inclusive stakeholder setting can be important in the context of the GDC process and upcoming WSIS+20 Review. The PNIF could serve as such a soundboard.

The Report of the IGF 2023 Policy Network on Internet Fragmentation is available at
https://www.intgovforum.org/en/filedepot_download/256/26667 .