

Avoiding Internet Fragmentation : Understanding and Contributing to Operationalising the GDC Commitment

Main session at the IGF 2024, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
19 December 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. In 2022 and 2023, the PNIF developed its [PNIF Framework for discussing fragmentation](#) that differentiates between fragmentation of the Internet *User experience*, fragmentation of Internet *Governance and coordination*, fragmentation of the Internet's *Technical Layer*, and technical, political and commercial developments that may have an impact on fragmentation. The goal of the Framework is to serve as a general guiding tool for continuing the dialogue about fragmentation.
2. In 2024 the PNIF continued to track the global discussion on Internet fragmentation and explore ways to contribute to fostering holistic multistakeholder dialogue on fragmentation. At the first PNIF webinar ([summary](#)), stakeholders confirmed that Internet fragmentation is still a matter of concern and stressed that it is important to focus on what one wants to achieve by avoiding fragmentation. The second PNIF webinar ([summary](#)) explored the outcomes of the UN Summit of the Future and how Internet fragmentation is addressed in the Global Digital Compact and what this means for the multistakeholder dialogue on fragmentation. The third PNIF webinar ([summary](#)) further unpacked the GDC article 29(c) and discusses how stakeholders can contribute to operationalising the commitment made by Member States.
3. The PNIF main session at the IGF2024 in Riyadh, built upon the insights and observations from the preceding webinars, to further explore the GDC commitment and examine how the multistakeholder community can contribute to its operationalisation and shape future dialogue on fragmentation, including in the context of the WSIS+20 review.

Global Digital Compact commitment

4. In the [Global Digital Compact](#) UN Member States commit to '*Promote international cooperation among all stakeholders to prevent, identify and address risks of fragmentation of the Internet in a timely manner (SDG16)*' (Objective 3, art 29, (c)).

Summary of the Discussion

Internet fragmentation. Understanding the commitment in GDC Article 29(c)

5. In art.29(c) UN Member States promote cooperation among stakeholders to address fragmentation in a timely manner. The text of art.29(c) remained unchanged throughout the various iterations of the draft Global Digital Compact (GDC) during the preparation process; this suggests that there is a strong consensus that fragmentation is a significant challenge. The GDC is now a key international document that can be invoked to remind countries moving toward fragmentation of the shared agreement to avoid such actions.
6. When discussing internet fragmentation, it is crucial to clearly define what concept of 'the Internet' one is referring to, for example:
 - From its original design, the Internet is a global network of interoperable networks. If fragmented, it risks breaking into isolated parts and "national internets," effectively ending the concept of an Internet.
 - In the IGF Leadership Panel's paper '*The Internet We Want*', the Internet is conceptualised as complete, whole, and open. However, discussing a "complete" or "whole" Internet becomes contradictory when conversations around fragmentation persist.
 - Achieving universal connectivity by 2030 - with safe and affordable access to the internet and meaningful use of digital enabled services for everyone - is a goal we all agreed upon. However, the risks of fragmentation threaten such an inclusive internet.
 - The Internet's technical layer remains stable, secure, and unfragmented. However, interference with its structure, management, or administration could jeopardize global interoperability. While fragmentation has not yet occurred at the technical layer, the risk has been steadily increasing in recent years, driven by geopolitical tensions. This growing risk is evident in regional and national legislation, such as data protection laws, evolving concepts of data sovereignty, and discussions in multilateral and international fora.
 - Whether the internet is considered fragmented depends on whose perspective you take. If you view the internet as a space where everyone can access all content and applications, then it is fragmented. However, if you focus on those who can afford (mobile) data, have robust infrastructure, and access more than handheld devices, the picture changes.
7. The political and technical dependencies, along with the economic implications of fragmentation, remain largely underexplored, with limited clear data available. Further study is needed to understand these dynamics. It is possible that, ultimately, the economic stakes could discourage a country from pursuing measures that risk internet fragmentation.
8. If a country or group of countries were to cease recognizing the authority of multistakeholder organizations, such as ICANN, or the importance of the multistakeholder model, it could lead to fragmentation at the core of the Internet. This lack of recognition would likely result in the coexistence of divergent internet systems—for example, a free and open model versus a more state-controlled one. Such a split would significantly disrupt communication and internet services, particularly in areas like email and messaging apps. If this fragmentation were to deepen, it would ultimately affect the user experience, undermining the seamless connectivity the Internet is designed to provide.

How to engage in the discussion and contribute to operationalising the GDC Article 29(c)

9. With global agreement on the goal of avoiding internet fragmentation, the community should seize the opportunity to present a report at the next IGF, comparing the state of progress from December 2024 to May 2025. The report should examine the current state of fragmentation, proposed measures that risk fragmentation, and any changes observed during this period. Key questions to address include: Has anything changed? Are we moving toward greater or lesser fragmentation? Understanding existing fragmentation attempts may also shed light on the underlying motivations behind them.
10. In 2027, the GDC review will require an assessment of what has been done to prevent, identify, and address internet fragmentation. However, a key challenge today is the lack of clear metrics or statistics to measure progress. Without objective measurement tools it'll be difficult for the UN to effectively review art. 29(c).
In the next six months leading up to the IGF, the PNIF could take the lead in developing a framework to address this gap. This framework could define measurable indicators or establish KPIs to enable the UN to evaluate efforts to prevent, identify, and mitigate the risks of internet fragmentation. By creating such a system, the PNIF can ensure that future reviews are based on concrete data and meaningful insights.
11. Continuing the conversation is crucial, and the IGF/PNIF has a central role in driving and facilitating this dialogue:
 - Facilitating Dialogue: Engaging the IGF stakeholder community in meaningful discussions on internet fragmentation, fostering collaboration and shared understanding.
 - Promoting Inclusive Participation: Encouraging diverse perspectives and ensuring all relevant stakeholders are actively involved in identifying risks and contributing practical solutions to prevent fragmentation.
 - Supporting Coherence: Bridging differing understandings of internet fragmentation by fostering a shared comprehension of the issue, helping align perspectives and actions.
 - Capacity Building: Sharing best practices, resources, and tools, such as the ISOC Internet Impact Toolkit and ICANN's tracking of emerging technologies and legislation, to empower stakeholders in addressing and mitigating fragmentation risks.
12. As the IGF community, it is crucial to recognize our own elitism, privilege, and how our experiences shape our views on internet fragmentation. We must remain aware that for billions of people, user experience fragmentation is a stark reality.
13. NRIs can play a crucial role and should be encouraged to organize debates on internet fragmentation, ensuring the inclusion of all local stakeholders, along with some international participation.
14. Addressing the risks of failing to collaborate effectively is essential to ensuring that the internet remains open, free, and secure. IGF platform is a bridge between the technical expertise and the policy making

15. It is crucial to involve governments in these conversations, as many risks of internet fragmentation often stem from government actions or policies, with security frequently cited as a justification. To advance the conversation constructively, the focus should be on addressing security concerns without compromising the core principles and structure of the Internet. This approach ensures that solutions uphold both security and the integrity of the Internet.
 16. When it comes to Internet security, there is no magical solution to address all problems, and we don't have all the answers. The Internet faces significant challenges, including the actions of bad actors. However, when evaluating security solutions that could potentially lead to fragmentation, they must pass critical tests: Are they necessary? Are they legal? Are they proportionate? Many solutions may already fail to meet the first criterion.
 17. Greater cooperation across silos is essential, including increased engagement from civil society in technical discussions. This involvement is crucial to avoid situations where changes in standards are discovered too late, forcing a reactive fight to ensure respect human rights. Active participation in these conversations allows for proactive advocacy and better outcomes.
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