

A Short Report on the 12th Internet Governance Forum

The Internet Governance Forum (IGF) 2017 that took place in Geneva, Switzerland, from 18 – 21 December 2017 on the theme “Shape your Digital Future”, reflected on a very turbulent year in global politics, with a number of issues resonating throughout the week: values on the Internet, digital future and frontier issues, dealing with data, cyber-security and digital commerce, and the need for action and capacity development. Perhaps succeeding better than in the real world, many convergences were created at the IGF. However, differences emerged as the discussion moved from principles to concrete action and details. For example, while there is shared understanding of the need for action in cyber-security, there are differences as to whether this should be done gradually through existing law, or through major action with the adoption of a cyber-treaty. Values also came into focus in many discussions on artificial intelligence (AI), fake news, the role of Internet companies, human rights, and others.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) dominated the discussion on the digital future, which reflected its prominence in media and public debates. Discussions ranged from known unknowns – technological progress, the importance of data for AI, autonomous weapons and cars, the relevance of ethics – to unknown unknowns on the limits of AI’s growth and its impact on the future of humanity. Data, cyber-security, and digital commerce were three of the most prominent issues in dealing with the known knowns in digital policy. Data was in the Top 5 most frequently used terms during the IGF. It featured in general debates, but also in very concrete discussions on what will happen on 25 May 2018, when the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) comes into effect. Cyber-security was another frequently mentioned concept. The underlying question was how to fill the gap in global cyber-security regulation, which appeared after the last United Nations Group of Governmental Experts on Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the Context of International Security (UN GGE) failed to reach consensus on a final report. Microsoft’s proposal for a Digital Geneva Convention triggered many debates, including controversies. The debate on digital commerce took place only one week after the World Trade Organization (WTO) Ministerial Conference in Buenos Aires, which failed to advance the discussion on e-commerce. Although it is too early to reflect on the next steps, a few issues emerged. These included a possible plurilateral agreement on digital commerce, and the risk that digital commerce regulation could be a back door for regulating issues of cyber-security and data protection.

The Annual Forum focused on some primary thematic topics such as: a) infrastructure – attending to questions such as, with the rapid advances in automation, AI and other data driven technologies, how do we prepare for the future; and how will the US Federal Communications Commission (FCC)’s decision on net neutrality affect policies worldwide; b) cyber-security: focusing on issues such as the need for a cyber-treaty; and how can the vulnerabilities and risks in smart devices and applications be regulated; c) human rights: on issues such as how can the problems of gender digital divide and online gender-based violence be addressed, and by whom; and what features should devices and tools have, in order to be used by everyone, including persons with a disability; d) legal: attending to issues such as to what extent are Internet

companies liable for online content that goes through their networks; and should blockchain technology be regulated, and if so, how; e) economic: debating questions like whether data is the oil of the economy, or a threat to privacy and social justice; and what are the costs of internet disruptions as they continue to take place around the world; f) development: attending to issues such as what would be the value-added solutions for addressing the digital divide; and are the new technologies promoting sustainable development, or creating new forms of digital divide; and g) socio-cultural: focusing on matters like how can the phenomena of “fake news” and “information disorder” be tackled effectively; and how can a proper line between what is appropriate and what is not for the internet be drawn and enforced without affecting the freedom of expression.

Although the IGF is not a panacea for solving all technology- and Internet-related problems, it succeeded in hosting frank and realistic discussions on the digital future. It also took steps towards concrete solutions, by publishing – for the first time – the *Geneva Messages*.¹

¹ Available at: <<https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/content/igf-2017-geneva-messages>>.