12 The Multistakeholder Concept as Narrative: A Discourse Analytical Approach

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Discrepancies between Ideas and Practice

Multistakeholder arrangements have a long political tradition on both the national and the international level.[1] A prominent example for the latter is the tripartite composition of the International Labor Organization, a United Nations agency founded in 1919, comprising representatives of governments, employers, and workers. The goal of tripartite organizations has been to aggregate the diversity of political positions into identifiable groups, which ideally negotiate consensual outcomes that are accepted as legitimate by all those affected, regardless of whether they directly participated in the process. Multistakeholder arrangements are a more recent variation of this model; they have emerged around cross-border or transnational issues, typically with civil society groups replacing trade unions as public interest representatives.

Over the last 20 years, multistakeholder processes have developed into a kind of new blueprint of transnational coordination. The UN Sustainable Development Goals, for example, have recognized the formation of partnerships between governments, the private sector, and civil society as a goal in itself (McKeon 2017). Likewise, the NETmundial declaration (2014) acknowledged the multistakeholder approach as the general basis of Internet governance processes. Somewhat antithetic to its rise as a role model for legitimate governance arrangements, however, is that empirical case studies have found little evidence in support of this success. Quite to the contrary, the academic literature keeps lamenting the poor performance of multistakeholder arrangements.

The apparent discrepancy between expectations and performance of multiactor approaches is itself an interesting issue to examine. A growing

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number of empirical studies, predominantly focusing on environmental policy, aim to understand the potential causes of the model's failures and search for ways to reduce them. Another, perhaps less obvious option to approach this discrepancy is to reflect on the model itself and the potential reasons for its rising popularity despite well-known performance problems. The second option takes an interest in the relation between concept and practices of multistakeholderism and explores this relationship from a discourse analytical perspective. It argues that discursive representations of reality are always performative; they exert a powerful impact on political processes by shaping collective perceptions of problems and their solutions, thereby giving meaning and direction to policy areas (Lynggaard 2012). For this reason, discourse analysis deserves more attention in Internet governance research.

The analysis of the multistakeholder concept touches on, and subjects to critical review, the shared knowledge that Internet governance produces about itself. As a long-term coproducer of knowledge related to Internet governance, academia should aim to include its own storylines in the analysis. No doubt, this is a difficult endeavor. One way of pursuing this goal is to focus on narratives and imaginaries as major building blocks of policy discourse. The next section introduces the concept of political narratives and imaginaries. The third section provides a short overview of the discussion on multistakeholderism from a narrative point of view. The fourth section empirically illustrates the performativity of the multistakeholder narrative, followed by a brief conclusion.

Narratives and Imaginaries

Discourses have been defined as knowledge orders consisting of "ensembles of ideas, concepts and categorizations" (Hajer 1995, 44), which ascribe meaning to the world and organize our interaction in it. A discourse can be distinguished from a mere discussion by an order that guides the creation of acceptable ideas, observations, and propositions. We thus speak of a discourse "to the extent that it is possible to register and describe a systematic set of rules for how central problems, their sources and solutions are articulated among a set of agents" (Lynggaard 2012, 90; see also Jones and McBeth 2010, 340). The analysis of public discourse can either examine actors and their discursive strategies (see Jørgensen's chapter 8) or

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focus on discursive artifacts and structures. This chapter is interested in the latter dimension; it studies collective meaning making as a form of narrative or plot structure relying on imaginaries and specific vocabularies such as "multistakeholderism." The common denominator of these literary constructs is the assumption that reality is always in need of representation and that any form of representation includes elements of distributed, authorless storytelling about how things really are. Even if discursive power is distributed very asymmetrically, no single actor is able to shape a public discourse. Narrativity has been characterized as a fundamental mode of "worldmaking" (Goodman 1978), and its analysis aims to decipher it as a contingent open-ended process that could always have taken a different course.

The historian and literary scholar Hayden White (1981, 2) describes narratives as a universal "metacode" that enables communicating "messages about the nature of a shared reality." Facts are selectively assembled into linear sequences that suggest a lesson. Irritating more than a few of his colleagues, White insists on the common roots of literary and political storytelling. The rhetorical strategies used, for instance, by academics to transform scattered data into an enlightening narrative, he argues, are based on the very same 19th-century plot structures as those used by novelists: satire, tragedy, comedy, and romance (White 1978). In the context of the political narrative on multistakeholderism, romances reward the struggle for the greater good by offering at least a thin silver lining on the horizon of democratic policy making.

Discourses imply narratives, and narratives, in turn, involve imaginaries or fictional elements. Fictions are not just invented; they are a necessary part of the political discourse, as Yaron Ezrahi (2012, 3–4) asserts. Well-established imaginaries such as the public sphere or civil society will help us experience fictions as facts on which rational behavior supposedly rests. Such imaginaries embody idealized representations of their subject areas and, as Charles Taylor (2004) emphasizes, they imply strong normative notions. Building on Ezrahi and Taylor, Sheila Jasanoff (2015, 4) defines imaginaries as institutionalized "collective beliefs about how society functions," how life should or should not be lived. Simultaneously, they provide the structural background against which discursive agency can evolve (Lynggaard 2012, 95).

Narratives and imaginaries constitute powerful sources of political ordering.[2] By appealing to political ideals and offering streamlined accounts of events and underlying causalities, they delimit the range of legitimate

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behavior and the space of rational public discourse (Gottweis 2006). Importantly in the context of the multistakeholder concept, narratives also involve "organizational potential" (Hajer 1995). This concerns social identities, including classifications, strata, and roles of actors, that structurally configure policy communities (for a famous example, see Anderson 1983) but also the motivation for overcoming obstacles and realizing their mission.

Studying narratives and imaginaries implies a focus on the how of political ordering. It is less interested in the "input and output of policymaking and their causal interrelation" (Pohle 2016, 3) than in the discursive ways of making it work and lending meaning to it. However, there is no one best way of conducting discourse analysis. While its origins reflect interpretative approaches, quantitative analyses are also becoming more common (Jones and McBeth 2010; Ten Oever, Milan, and Beraldo's chapter 10). This chapter combines a literature review on the multistakeholder model within but also beyond Internet governance with my long-standing experience as a participant of these processes. The next section illuminates typical accounts of multistakeholderism to illustrate how it gains credibility and mobilizes support amid evidence of mixed or even poor results.

The Multistakeholder Narrative: A Romantic Emplotment

As a term of art, "multistakeholder" emerged in the 1990s and gained broader traction after the turn of the millennium. Toward the end of the 1990s, the term began spreading across policy domains and came to also denote private regulatory arrangements. Famous examples of the multistakeholder approach are the Forest Stewardship Council (founded in 1993), the Global Reporting Initiative (founded in 1997), and the World Commission on Dams (1998–2000), the latter of which was frequently mentioned in the context of the founding of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF). In the meantime, multipartite bodies have also become common in areas such as global trade and the production of consumer goods (Fransen and Kolk 2007).

The reasons for the proliferation of the multistakeholder approach have aroused some interest in the social sciences. A common functional explanation points to coordination problems in the international sphere. According to this view, multistakeholder arrangements are a response to the increasing number of cross-border policy issues that require cooperation beyond the scope and competence of international organizations. The integration

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of the private sector, civil society, and academia are expected to ensure the necessary degree of expertise and other resources but also compliance and support at the implementation stage.

Related explanations refer to the regulatory gaps of international policy fora, as Baumann-Pauly et al. (2017, 772) note: multistakeholder initiatives "increasingly serve a global governance function in regulating what governments leave effectively unregulated" (see also Pattberg and Widerberg 2015). Another widespread view interprets them as the result of bottom-up policy pressure. From this perspective, it is mainly civil society that is pushing for the democratization of international policy making. Giving nonstate actors a greater say in matters directly relevant for them is assumed to increase the legitimacy and effectiveness of international regulation.

Each of these explanations seems plausible. Specifically, they make sense by linking the formation of the multistakeholder approach to well-known deficits of international policy making. Multistakeholder arrangements, in other words, are presented as novel solutions to long-term structural problems of globalization. Their status as solutions confers to them a normative dimension. Seen through the lens of White's plot structure, the framing of multistakeholder efforts as a solution for intricate political problems suggests a romantic tale with a positive ending. Multistakeholder approaches seem to show that even the unruly sphere outside the nation-state can be changed for the better.

The political and, to some extent, academic discourse on multistakeholderism is characterized by storylines about how the poor state of transnational policy making can be transformed through new partnerships between various stakeholders. In particular, three recurring promises structure this narrative: the ideal of global representation, the ideal of democratizing policy making, and the ideal of improved outcomes.

Global Representation

International rulemaking has traditionally been the remit of governments and thus taken place beyond the reach of ordinary citizens. With the steady increase of transnational regulation and its impact on domestic law, nonstate actors have pointed out the lack of representation of those affected by global governance regimes. As the Cardoso report (United Nations 2004, 8) forcefully states, "The substance of politics is fast globalizing …, the process of politics is not; its principal institutions … remain firmly rooted at

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the national or local level." Citizens lack institutional means to participate in transnational policy processes and make their concerns known. With regard to Internet governance, the underrepresentation of nonstate actors seems especially problematic because the development and operation of the digital infrastructure has been predominantly private sector driven. Throughout the 2003–2005 UN World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), the first intergovernmental process concerning itself with Internet governance, the inclusion of nonstate actors was therefore a matter of constant tension between state and nonstate actors (Epstein 2013).

The multistakeholder approach is presented as a solution to the problem of underrepresentation since it is expected to include a wide spectrum of perspectives, empower marginalized groups, and thereby form a counterforce to more powerful actors (Bécault et al. 2015). Multistakeholder processes have come to embody a redefined notion of global representation. Hence, the litmus test by which multistakeholder processes are assessed is the extent to which they manage to include the diversity of interests of those affected and to strike a power balance among them (Pattberg and Widerberg 2016).

Democratizing Policy Making

A second problem that multistakeholder initiatives are supposed to address concerns democratic deficits. Globalization weakens democracy in several ways. As Nanz and Steffek (2004, 314) observe, the concept of democratic legitimacy rests on the idea that the people set and consent to the rules that organize their political association. The decoupling of the global policy process from the constitutional apparatus of the nation-states, including the rule of law, creates a "massive democratic deficit." Moreover, traditional forms of holding political power to account do not work in global policy processes. What is needed to tackle the legitimacy deficit in the transnational sphere is new decision-making processes that incorporate principles of deliberative and participatory democracy and provide "accountability to citizens everywhere" (United Nations 2004, 24). Multistakeholder processes are assumed to achieve this goal by establishing communities of interest as a digitally enabled equivalent to territorial constituencies. They show the potential to generate new forms of procedural fairness, transparency, and accountability and thus contribute to the overdue democratization of the global sphere.

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Improved Outcomes

The third challenge pertains to the overall quality of global policy making. Intergovernmental organizations are considered unable to cope with the amount, gravity, complexity, and pressing nature of today's challenges (Bäckstrand et al. 2010). Negotiation processes are found tardy, at times substantially inadequate, and leaving many policy issues unanswered owing to conflicting interests, missing expertise, dedication, and/or follow-through. A widespread disregard of human rights among governments constitutes another serious shortcoming for the area of Internet governance, which is particularly sensitive to the violation of information freedoms and privacy rights. Multistakeholder processes are regarded as a solution to these challenges because they name and shame misconduct and mobilize expertise, skills, and funding (Fransen 2012, 165). In addition to the expertise brought to the table by civil society and the private sector, it is also the learning processes enabled by a consensual style of collaboration that are said to improve the quality and legitimacy of policy outcomes (Baumann-Pauly et al. 2017; Pattberg and Widerberg 2015).

Taken together, the multistakeholder narrative exhibits a deliberative and participatory, nearly Habermasian understanding of democratic policy making with a strong emphasis on process. As Powers and Jablonski (2015, 136) nicely phrase it, this notion presumes "that strategic actors, in the right setting and by embracing shared norms, can disregard their political motivations and pressures to deliberate, listen, adjust perspectives, and come into an agreement regarding a matter of public concern." But can this assumption be regarded as an adequate description of multistakeholder policy making? Despite its increasing popularity, the overall results of multistakeholder initiatives in the transnational sphere turn out to be rather sobering.

The majority of empirical case studies report disappointing outcomes.[3] For instance, a survey by Pattberg and Widerberg (2016) on tripartite partnerships in sustainable development found that most initiatives fail not only to develop new global regulatory norms but also to improve the implementation of existing regulation or to substantially increase the integration of marginalized groups. Yet as Powers and Jablonski (2015, 152–153) observe, the significance of stakeholder inclusion for the legitimacy of policy initiatives leads to strong pressure on actors to participate, thereby considerably narrowing the room for independent criticism of the outcomes

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or the lack thereof. Tripartite partnerships, Pattberg and Widerberg (2016, 45) conclude, are “not just neutral instruments” for realizing agreed policy tasks; they are “sites of contestation over distinct technologies and practices.” Hence, multistakeholder initiatives have their own shortcomings, and they may fail where multilateral processes have previously gone awry.

Given these empirical findings, the plausibility of the multistakeholder narrative seems to rest less on its practical achievements than on its coherence and plot. What lends credibility to the narrative are the undeniable maladies of global regulation and how it connects these to the worthwhile goals of multistakeholderism. These goals, in turn, derive their power from an imaginary that reaches beyond its immediate context of application. The striking popularity of the multistakeholder approach also originates in its reference to a metanarrative. The great promise of this metanarrative is that by implementing principles such as inclusiveness, transparency, equality, and procedural fairness, the national concept of democracy can be extended beyond territorial borders and thereby confer to transnational policy making the legitimacy it still lacks. The idea of democratizing global regulation is so powerful and uplifting that it seems to withstand all evidence to the contrary.

Yet discourse analysis is less interested in adjusting narratives or reforming malfunctioning processes than in understanding how the two worlds of narrativity and regulatory practice interact. Specifically, discourse analysis studies how narratives, once they have reached a certain degree of normality and inevitability (Taylor 2004, 17) become an enabling source of shared goals and norms, how they direct action and create a common sense of legitimacy. The next section demonstrates the stakeholder narrative at work by introducing the IGF and the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) as two examples, chosen to illustrate the performative effect of the three promises described earlier.

The Multistakeholder Narrative at Work

The term “multistakeholder” entered the Internet governance landscape in 2005 during WSIS, which found that existing governance mechanisms did not provide the conditions for a meaningful participation of all stakeholder groups. The multistakeholder concept gained support for offering a middle

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ground between the contested alternatives of private versus public regulation of the Internet, which had paralyzed large parts of the WSIS negotiations (Musiani and Pohle 2014, 4). Following WSIS, the multistakeholder concept rapidly turned into a self-evident norm of the discourse in Internet governance. Today, it denotes a broad range of organizational models and processes (Raymond and DeNardis 2015, 14).

The epitome of the multistakeholder approach in the digital domain is the IGF. Mandated by WSIS and founded in 2006, the IGF constitutes a global space for multistakeholder policy dialogue. It is an annual conference embedded in preparatory meetings, intersessional activities, and a growing number of national and regional offspring. The second example, ICANN, is a US-based nonprofit corporation tasked with regulating the domain name system (DNS) of the Internet. It was founded in 1998, following a white paper issued by the US Department of Commerce (1998) on the premise that DNS policies should be developed by a private governance model independent of government control. Unlike the IGF, ICANN produces concrete outcomes in the form of binding policies. The present mission and legitimacy of ICANN and the IGF are firmly rooted in the imaginaries of the multistakeholder approach. Both organizations are judged by the credibility of their claims of global representativeness, their democratic standards, and their quality of output.

IGF: "Enact" the Stakeholder Taxonomy

The IGF is the first organization in Internet governance whose founding was explicitly based on the multistakeholder principle. The outcome document of WSIS (2005) stated that the IGF should "build on the complementarity between all stakeholders involved," and it named them in line with the categories used throughout the WSIS process: "governments, business entities, civil society and intergovernmental organizations." Although this classification appears rather clear-cut and simple, the stakeholders expressed from the outset uneasiness and dissent about its attributions. Civil society and the technical sector, for example, criticized the UN stakeholder taxonomy for misrepresenting them and asked for separate categories. These categories matter to the stakeholders because they determine their share of seats in committees and on workshop panels, and they also shape identities in the public discourse. The stakeholder roles, divisions, privileges, and boundaries are a permanent issue in Internet governance.

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Since the geographic and political diversity of the actors involved is expanding, the stakeholder concept also struggles with problems of internal coherence. This seems mainly a problem for civil society and governments, both of which are grappling with a broad range of opinions cutting across the formal classification scheme. Recalling the enormous effort of making the stakeholder taxonomy work within the IGF, Mueller (2010, 114) notes how the "simple act" of assembling people from various sectors "for non-binding dialogue about policy can be intensely political." The stakeholders spent "countless hours" on holding the stakeholder groups together and negotiating the boundaries between them, a struggle that Mueller characterizes as "politics of representation" (Mueller 2010, 114–116).

The difficult match between the stakeholder taxonomy and the political spectrum in Internet governance is clearly at odds with the basic idea of multistakeholderism, which assumes that political positions can be aggregated along the lines of formal affiliations. Ironically, civil society, the most ardent advocate of multistakeholder representation, faces the biggest challenge in aligning its diverse membership on this model. The case of the IGF demonstrates that the stakeholder model does not constitute a natural representation of global perspectives. On the contrary, it needs to be constantly "enacted" (Epstein 2013), and a significant part of multistakeholder collaboration in the IGF is devoted to doing justice to the democratic imaginary of global representation through the never-ending re-creation of the stakeholder scheme.

ICANN: Catching Up with Democratic Standards

To be fair, the ICANN community itself never uses the term "democracy." However, the white paper from the Department of Commerce (1998) specified a set of prerequisites for the development of "sound, fair and widely accepted policies," which do qualify as democratic procedures.[4] Among them are the requirements of representation and openness and transparency and, most importantly, that the new corporation should "operate for the benefit of the Internet community as a whole" (1998, 31749). Meanwhile, ICANN (2013, 2) has updated the white paper's language and added "equality" to the criteria DNS regulation is supposed to implement: "At the heart of ICANN's policy-making is what is called a 'multistakeholder model.' This decentralized governance model places individuals, industry, non-commercial interests and government on an equal level."

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ICANN's policy development process has become increasingly transparent and open to participation over the years; however, the actual decision-making authority has remained very resistant to change. The most formalized Consensus Policy Development Process in ICANN consists of no fewer than 15 steps, beginning with identifying an issue, followed by circles of reports and public comment periods, finally resulting in a recommendation to the board. No matter how inclusive, open, and fair the policy development process, the final decisions are taken by the board—on the basis of advice provided by ICANN staff, a very influential but informal filter between the bottom-up policy process and the board. While the multistakeholder narrative is driven by the idea of democratizing the transnational sphere, ICANN is still struggling to catch up with basic standards of democratic nation states. Yet remarkably, even striking democratic deficiencies are no reason for ICANN's stakeholders to question the validity of the multistakeholder approach per se. Holding ICANN's authority to account is, rather, something to be fought out, as show the intense negotiations surrounding the "Empowered Community mechanism," created in 2019. Multistakeholderism in ICANN, it seems, is less a ready-made solution for the pressing shortcomings of global regulation than a long-term agenda in itself.

IGF: Negotiating the Meaning of Outcomes

Its mandate requests that the IGF discuss, facilitate, identify, or advise on "public policy issues related to key elements of Internet governance" (WSIS 2005). How this task should be approached has been a contested issue from the start. The IGF's initial focus on enabling discourse and collaboration rather than specific recommendations was met with skepticism by those who did not believe in the impact of multistakeholder dialogue (Mueller 2015). A UN working group on "improvements to the IGF" also recommended more tangible outcomes—for example, by addressing specific policy questions and documenting the range of opinions on it (UN General Assembly 2012, 4). The IGF's cautious efforts to strengthen its efficacy notwithstanding, the actual significance of its policy dialogue is hard to determine. For some, the policy dialogue is a waste of time; for others it facilitates converging expertise, norms, and values. Epstein (2013, 147) suggests a "normalizing" role of the IGF for including nonstate actors in multilateral processes, while Mueller (2010, 122) speculates that the IGF could

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institutionalize our "recognition that authority over Internet governance is highly distributed."

Strikingly, the outcome of the multistakeholder dialogue is primarily assessed "through the lens of process" (Epstein 2013, 147), rather than against the background of its mandate or the many transnational policy issues awaiting attention. So far, no study has been carried out to empirically assess the impact and quality of the multistakeholder body. The proponents' focus on process supports the proposition that multistakeholderism "is sometimes viewed as a value in itself" rather than an effective form of global regulation (Raymond and DeNardis 2015, 39). In light of the multistakeholder narrative, which promises better policy outcomes, it is also interesting to note that the IGF stakeholders do not agree on what actually constitutes outcomes or on the type of outcome the IGF should strive for. The diversity of multistakeholder input thus appears as a double-edged sword; it legitimizes policy outcomes and, simultaneously, constitutes an obstacle to achieving better ones.

Conclusion: Disenchanting the Multistakeholder Narrative

This chapter starts from the premise that the discourse on Internet governance can be studied as a powerful source of political ordering. It claims that core concepts such as multistakeholderism, which are referred to by practitioners and academics alike, represent reality in a meaning-making and performative way (see Musiani's chapter 4). Narratives and imaginaries exhibit a strong normative and an organizing capacity, which influence how we interpret and engage with the world: multistakeholderism provides a sense of identity and belonging to a geographically scattered community, offers a taxonomy for defining the relationships among its members, and situates this community in a broader ideological context of competing modes of transnational regulation.

The actual achievements of the multistakeholder concept are likely to be primarily of a sensemaking nature. Its credibility is based on political aspirations rather than on a proven superior regulatory efficacy. From an empirical perspective, it is striking how much effort it takes to make multistakeholderism work. It is no exaggeration to say that the stakeholders take pains to adapt the reality of Internet governance to meet the concept's assumptions. In practice, the people involved do not easily fit into the stakeholder

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categories. Likewise, formal and informal authorities do not like to be held accountable, and bottom-up consensus proves to be as contested as other modes of decision-making. Multistakeholderism, it turns out, is less a regulatory approach than an end in itself; an end that shifts attention to process and requests a high degree of belief and loyalty from its followers.

What are the consequences of these findings? Is it time to abandon the multistakeholder approach? If narrativity and imaginaries are indeed a necessary, irreducible part of public discourse, as Ezrahi (2012), Stone (1997), and White (1981) suggest, the discrepancy between political aspirations and practical experiences should come as no surprise. Narratives and imaginaries may gradually fade out but not without other ones taking their place if only to enable meaningful political action. Given that narrativity cannot be skirted, Internet governance research should include discourse analytical approaches in its methodological repertoire. Moreover, it should devote systematic attention to the "worldmaking" implications of discourse (its own contributions included) and seek to dismantle its power by means of a deromanticizing critique of Internet governance narratives.

Notes

1. This chapter is an updated and shortened version of Hofmann (2016).

2. In chapter 8, Jørgensen speaks of "discursive imperialism" to denote the expanding scope of successful discourses.

3. For a more extended literature review on the reasons for the poor performance, see Hofmann (2016, 33–35).

4. Democracy can be defined in different ways. In *Democracy and Its Critics*, Robert Dahl (1989, 37) suggests five standards, which are applicable to ICANN because he intended them for associations, not for territorial nation-states. These standards are effective participation, voting equality, enlightened understanding, control of the agenda, and inclusion of adults.

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