

Legitimacy, Power, and Inequalities in the Multistakeholder Internet Governance: Analyzing IANA Transition

Daniel Oppermann*

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The IANA Stewardship Transition Process was one of the major reform processes within the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) ecosystem, which itself is one of the main organisations of Internet governance (IG). The process started in 2014 and was barely noticed by the public. The objective was to transfer oversight of the Internet Assigned Numbers Authority (IANA) from very few actors to a few more, aiming to reach a representative character. IANA is part of the Domain Name System (DNS) and represents a crucial part of what is often referred to as the backbone of the Internet. Initially run on a voluntary basis at the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA) and then for many years at the University of Southern California, it was controlled by the US Department of Commerce through a contract with the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA). Over the years, this unilateral status became the subject of ongoing disputes within the Internet community.

The book *Legitimacy, Power, and Inequalities in the Multistakeholder Internet Governance*, written by Nicola Palladino and Mauro Santaniello of the Department of Political and Social Studies of the University of Salerno (Italy), is a comprehensive analysis of the IANA Stewardship Transition Process. It was published as part of Palgrave Macmillan's *Information Technology and Global Governance Series*, coordinated by Derrick Cogburn of American University (USA).

The book is organised into eight chapters. In the introduction and the first chapters, the authors present an overview of the Western Internet governance discourse

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on multistakeholderism, followed by historical events around the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET) in the 1970s and 1980s, the development of the DNS and the early and more informal days of the IANA, the 1990s when the Internet became public and when organisations like the Internet Society (ISOC) and ICANN were founded, until events like the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS, 2003/2005) and the Internet Governance Forum (IGF, annually since 2006) introduced the first meeting environments for the newly constituted Internet governance community (Weber 2009: 164). The book continues with what IG researchers and attentive newspaper readers are all familiar with: in 2013, Edward Snowden revealed Internet surveillance by US espionage forces, the IG community responded by organising the NetMundial Meeting in Brazil in 2014, which was the moment when the US government decided to strategically give up on its unilateral control over IANA. This was the moment the IANA Stewardship Transition Process started.

The general overview given in chapter one of the book is followed by two chapters on two components that are essential to understand Internet governance from a social and political science perspective: the theoretical framework (chapter two) and the technical functioning (written from a social science perspective) of the DNS (chapter three). For insiders of the IG discourse, the theoretical approach presented here is not a surprise: it is the multistakeholder approach (Kulesza 2018), the one and only governance model in the Western IG community, which, over the years, has reached an almost religious status – look at it, repeat it and better not question it. However, the multistakeholder model has indeed been discussed and carefully criticised in the past, carefully enough to not get into deeper debates ‘about the possibilities of improving and changing the governance arrangements in this field’ (Palladino and Santaniello 2021: 22). With this statement, the authors initiate a historical presentation of the multistakeholder approach using the pillars that are commonly used in this specific community: the Western (a.k.a. ‘global’) discourses on globalisation and global governance from the perspective of Political Science and International Relations literature (Jang, McSparren and Rashchupkina 2016). Subsequently, they deepen the debate by addressing some of the critical aspects, like power distribution and the dominant role of ‘experts from the Global North and the private sector, while weaker stakeholders are exposed to manipulation and control due to the lack of necessary knowledge and/or resources to adequately promote their points of view during discussions’ (Palladino and Santaniello 2021: 27). Besides that, this theoretical chapter offers even more valuable details regarding the debates on multistakeholder governance touching on several aspects like inclusiveness, representativeness, fairness, accountability, etc.

To move from the theoretical to the empirical part of the book, chapter three addresses some of the technical details that are important for understanding IG, especially for social and political scientists. It is a great dilemma (or a great opportunity?) in this research field that social science governance researchers are usually not familiar with network technologies and computer engineers (among others) are unfamiliar with political science theory. This makes it necessary to have a chapter providing an introduction to the DNS in the 1970s and 1980s, followed by the early days of the IANA and a number

of key actors like ISOC, ICANN, Network Solutions Inc. (NSI), as well as WSIS and the Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG) until the Snowden revelations in 2013.

Chapters four to seven address the IANA Stewardship Transition Process, which is the main topic of the book. It is here that the authors present a number of research questions like ‘Did the institutional design of the IANA transition process involve all relevant actors and interests in the decision-making process?’ (Palladino and Santaniello 2021: 82). Additional research questions are added here and in the following chapters. Some of the main aspects analysed in this part of the book concern questions of legitimacy, inclusiveness and representation throughout the IANA Stewardship Transition Process. Chapter four provides an overview of the initial phase of the process, the preparatory meetings and documents, the positions of actors like NTIA, ICANN and its individual member-organisations and groups like the Governmental Advisory Committee (GAC) or the Generic Names Supporting Organization (GNSO), plus the foundation of the Cross-Community-Working-Group as an important actor of the transition process.

The analysis of participating groups shows a lack of representation from civil society, while the private business sector had a dominant role, for example, among voting positions, throughout the process. The authors state that ‘the drafting process of the IANA transition had been dominated by an interweaving of technical and economic interests, with a significative presence of governments, while civil society constituted a very marginal voice’ (Palladino and Santaniello 2021: 88). The complexity of the IANA Stewardship Transition Process has generated conflicts among stakeholder groups, some of which are also addressed in chapter six of the book. Finally, the authors conclude that the transition process has not removed certain issues from the previous arrangements of the DNS regime. They call the process a ‘missed opportunity to overcome those legitimacy deficits’ (Palladino and Santaniello 2021: 140). Furthermore, they underline the ‘overwhelming presence of Western registries and private sector actors’ (Palladino and Santaniello 2021: 144) during the process. The process itself has therefore strengthened the position of already dominant actors in the ICANN ecosystem, fortifying a status quo of Western rule in Internet governance.

Palladino’s and Santaniello’s analysis is an especially valuable contribution to IG research. The IANA Stewardship Transition Process is one of the most important procedures that took place in IG in the past few years, and it is largely overlooked in social science research. Students and researchers interested in IG and/or multistakeholderism are recommended to read this book. It is also, although criticising the Western dominance in IG, representing Eurocentrism or Western-Centrism in the research field itself, where some states have names and most others are just ‘the developing countries’, an outdated term in a time when even high-income countries should have understood that their level of ‘development’ is not the ultimate goal but a destructive force against the planet. One of the few exceptions from the South is, as also mentioned in this book, Brazil, whose strong presence in IG goes back to the strength of the Brazilian Internet Steering Committee (in Portuguese: CGI) and the respective Network Information Centre (NIC.br), which were able to flourish as a type of monopoly in a protected economy with a strong national spirit. Economic protectionism is a no-go in Western mainstream IG.

Especially the private sector, including the DNS industry within the ICANN ecosystem (Oppermann 2014), would like to see Brazil remove barriers to its market, which is unlikely to happen.

The dominance of Western actors in the IANA Stewardship Transition Process does not come as a surprise. It is the confirmation of an unfortunate status quo that the community was, or should be, aware of. But maybe it is also a precursor to what can happen in the near future. Internet governance might in fact become (or maybe it already is) a reflection of the next East-West conflict (Doyle 2018) that is clearly on the table with China's position on restrictive network control and Russia closing doors for communication with the West. Countries of the Global South could once again become playing cards or 'second-class' allies in this conflict (unless they decide not to). The constellations in the IANA Stewardship Transition Process are then a foretaste for Internet governance in the coming decades.

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