ECPR General Conference 2011

Section 35, Panel 4

Classic Elite Theory, Global Democratic Governance and the Emergence of Global Elites

Is Internet governance a democratic process ? Multistakeholderism and transnational elites[1]

Jean-Marie Chenou
IEPI – CRII
Université de Lausanne

Jean-Marie.Chenou@unil.ch

Abstract :

Internet governance is representative of new modes of transnational and semi-privatized governance. It is often described as being a multistakeholder process. Various stakeholders such as states, intergovernmental organizations, the private sector, the technical community, academics and civil society are able to participate to the elaboration of common rules for the Internet in forums such as the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers or the UN-sponsored Internet Governance Forum. According to several observers, this process is an embryonic form of transnational democracy. In this paper, I argue that Internet governance is better described as an elitist process. I will first assert that it is useful for a critical approach to international relations to focus on transnational elites as key actors in new forms of governance. Transnational elites are a way to criticize both state-centered and liberal/pluralist visions of global governance without assuming the *a priori* existence of a unified transnational capitalist class. I will then combine critical international relations with elite theory and classical sociology to outline a definition of the concept of transnational elites. This part represents an attempt to 'transnationalise' some key concepts of classical political sociology to study global politics rather than interstate relations. Finally, I will try to explain to what extent the concept of transnational elites applies to my case study and discuss the democratic character of Internet governance. In this last part, I will draw upon C. Wright Mills and his concept of "power elite" and use some data on the history of Internet governance and use network analysis to re-construct the emergence of this political issue in the light of elite theory.

Keywords : Global governance, elite theory, Internet governance

1. Introduction

Internet governance emerged as a political issue in the mid-1990s. In a few years, an innovative governance system was created. This governance system is complex and involves many actors in many forums (see Annex 1). As defined by a UN-sponsored expert group, Internet governance is the management of the network by different parties in their own role (Groupe de travail sur la gouvernance de l'Internet, 2005). In fact, the network is governed in a decentralized and semi-privatized way, with the participation of various types of actors in several forums. This is a significant change from the previous telecommunications governance regimes, including the International Telecommunications Union, that tackled most of telecommunications-related international issues up to the 1990s. As such, Internet governance is representative of new forms of governance that are replacing multilateralism on many technical issues. Since multilateralism has been harshly criticized (Alvarez, 2000) and is going through a crisis (Cox, 1992), it is interesting to evaluate the democratic potential of such forms of governance that might become more important in

---

1 Very first draft. The net work analysis is still under contruction. Comments most welcome.

the coming years. Internet governance has become a crucial issue in world politics and is now discussed at the highest levels of diplomacy, as shown by the organization of an eG8 in May 2011 in France. Internet is believed by many leaders to have a crucial impact on trade relations as well as on traditional diplomacy that addresses the issues of war and peace among countries. Internet governance is also emerging as an interdisciplinary academic field, since it raises legal, political, economical and social issues. As far as the International Relations are concerned, most of the available literature on Internet Governance is authored by scholars that are active in the various forums tackling Internet governance-related issues. Thus, this literature is in a problem-solving perspective, according to Cox's famous distinction between problem-solving and critical perspective (Cox, 1981). They take the existing governance regime for granted and try to analyse how it works and how it could be improved. The book edited by William Drake and Wilson III "Governing electronic Networks is representative of such an approach and gathers many of the most-quoted authors on the issue (Drake and Wilson III, 2009). The volume describes various aspects of Internet governance regime (among other telecommunications regimes) and seeks way to improve its legitimacy by proposing an increased participation of civil society organizations and developing countries. Another strand of literature takes Internet governance as an example of global dynamics but rarely analyses in greater depth the peculiarities of this particular political issue. This is the case of both realist (Drezner, 2004) and neo-marxist literature (Sum, 2003). Other authors look further into the specific history of Internet governance, but not from a political science perspective and thus fail to fully address the issue of power struggle in this particular area (Mueller, 2002). Hence, there is a need for a critical perspective on Internet governance that could be able to analyse the domination issues of the existing order by examining the specific dynamics of Internet governance and the particular role of powerful and dominated actors. This means that the specificity of Internet governance has to be taken seriously but also that a critical understanding of Internet governance requires a historical and retrospective look on how Internet governance was politicized and institutionalized and what the perspectives for change might be. In this paper, I will try to contribute to a critical understanding of Internet governance and adopt an elitist approach of this issue-area of world politics. Drawing upon political sociology, I will be able to criticize the dominant liberal/pluralist approach and show that Internet governance is an elitist process rather than a democratization of world politics. In order to do that, I will try to show whether the powerful individuals involved in the institutionalization of internet governance were connected in such a way that the concept of power elite coined by Charles Wright Mills better describes this political process than the dominant pluralist approach. I will focus on the second half of the 1990s, from the emergence of Internet governance as a political issue to its institutionalization, mainly through the creation of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers in 1998. I will look to the most powerful individuals and their institutional position, and to the circulation of these individuals among the main groups of actors of Internet governance. In a first section, I will reformulate some of the International Relations academic debate in terms of a pluralist vs. elitist view of world politics. I will then draw upon Wright Mills and Bourdieu to propose an approach based on a transnational and elitist view of world politics and a differentiated empirical analysis of transnational fields. In a third section, I will apply this approach to the particular case of Internet governance. In a fourth section, I will analyse the empirical findings and describe the emergence and institutionalization of a power of Internet governance. Finally, I will explore the significance of these findings for a critical study of world politics and discuss the relation between the existence of a power elite in a single transnational field and an elitist view of global politics.

2. The elitist/pluralist debate in the study of world politics

While realism occupies an important place in the study of International Relations, society-centered approaches to political power are particularly well-equipped to analyse change in a context of globalization. To some extent, they re-interpret the elitist-pluralist debate that took place in the

scholarship at a national level.

International relations were founded on the dichotomy between inside (national politics) and outside (relations between states). According to this view, the two levels are actually and analytically distinct. The national level is characterised by a centralisation of power and is organised among hierarchical lines while the international level is anarchical and power is decentralised (Waltz, 1979). This clear distinction has been blurred by the growing transnational flows that were evidenced from the 1970s on. State-centred approaches reacted to what would be later called globalisation by studying complex interdependence and transnational relations as an intermediary level between the national and the international (Keohane and Nye, 1972)(Keohane and Nye, 2000). This approach is limited and is not able to encompass the wide spectrum of world politics. Interdependence is in this view merely an interdependence between states and transnational relations are not the actual level of study of Keohane and Nye but rather factors that can affect the international level which remains the focus of their analysis and that of mainstream International Relations in general.

Globalisation is much more than a growing interdependence between states and the contamination of international politics by transnational relations. In other worlds, globalisation is not only an internationalisation as argued for example by Hirst et al. (2009), nor the emergence of a new transnational level. Globalisation is however not about the decline of the state and the emergence of a border-less world either. It is a complex and heterogeneous process. Globalisation requires a paradigm change in political science "in order to describe and explain *both* the historical power of states *and* the current dramatic crystallisation of those complex social, economic, and political webs that constitutes the changing world system today" (Cerny, 2010; p. 31, emphasis in original). Cerny (2010), among other authors, calls for a new paradigm of world politics, taking into account sub-national actors acting both locally and transnationally, the transformation of the state, and the new modes of governance that are replacing the multilateral institutions of the 20th century. The world politics paradigm refuses to analytically separate between domestic politics and International Relations (Cerny, 2010; p. 12). It studies the multi-nucleated global political system where different 'groups' are often interconnected in complex ways that reflect diverse, even contrasting, identities and belongings, cutting across territory, class, gender, ethnicity, family ties, and the like (Cerny, 2010; p. 13).

The concept of governance, although criticised, is important to such a paradigm. Governance can describe a wide variety of structures and processes that cannot be described as government and are more institutionally embodied than an abstract rule. The concept can be used to study the complex sets of both formal and informal institutions and rules and the existence of both private and public actors and institutions without ruling out a priori any actor or process. It is a concept that allows at the same time the study of global governance through multilateral institutions and the transnational private governance (see table 1). It encompasses the various types of relationships that can be created between states, markets and institutionalised regulation, from auto-regulation to international regimes (Rioux, 2005). Governance is used in this paper as in most studies of Internet governance since there are no widely accepted alternative to the use of this concept when trying to describe this particular form of organising world politics. It is however not used in a prescriptive way to differentiate good semi-privatised and efficient governance from the outdated model of multilateralism. The concept is a useful base for a study of a complex transnational political process. It does not imply a horizontal political process nor the absence of domination and may be the first step of an analysis of power relations in world politics.

Table 1: Transnational governance structures and processes (Cerny, 2010, p. 187)

	Formal	Informal
Public	International institutions and intergovernmental regimes	transgovernmental networks and policy communities
Private	Private regimes, self-regulatory bodies, law merchant, etc.	transnational policy networks, NGOs, advocacy coalitions, transnational interest and value groups

In a world politics approach, the question of power is very different from how it has been conceptualised in the dominant state-centred IR of the second half of the 20th century. Power has to be analysed from a transnational point of view. There is not only power differentials among states leading to a certain form of hierarchy among them. There are different ways of conceptualising power from a transnational and society-centred perspective that also includes the question of state power. First, a pluralist (or liberal) view describe a plurality of interests within society that leads to a polyarchy, a regime of competition between private interests advocated by groups and arbitrated by the state. Dahl (1961)(Dahl, 1978) presented both a theoretical framework for pluralism and an empirical study of it at the local level. It became the common view of societal power, especially in the United States. This approach stresses the role of civil society and see the state (or any other democratic decision-making body) as an arbitrator. Applied to world politics, the concept of pluralism leads to the description of an emerging transnational democracy. In this view, not only democracy has become an almost universal standard at the national level, but the potential for a transnational democracy exists after the end of the cold war and with the rise of transnational civil society (McGrew, 2002). Since the 1990s, many studies focus on the role of transnational civil society groups in various issue-areas (Keck and Sikkink, 1998)(Risse-Kappen, 1995). According to this approach, the participation of civil society and other stakeholders should be able to contribute to the definition of a policy at a transnational level just as the various interest groups are able to contribute to the definition of the general interest of a pluralist democracy. The procedure and inclusion of civil society is in this view key to the creation of a deliberative space at the transnational level (Dryzek, 1999). The growth of civil society actors is thus seen as a democratisation of world politics, away from the autocratic state system (Boli and George, 1997). Many studies of Internet governance share this view and hail multistakeholderism as an opportunity to enhance the role of civil society (Mathiason, 2008) and the way towards some form of transnational democracy.

The Marxist tradition has been the most important alternative to pluralist-democratic conception of power (Miliband, 1973; p. 13). Even though Marx offers no systematic analysis of the state, a Marxist theory does exist that started from Marx's statements: "The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie. [...] Political power, properly so called, is merely the organised power of one class for oppressing another." (Marx and Engels, 1969). Starting from this society-centred approach and economicist perspective, Marxists then tried to theorise the idea of a relative autonomy of the state from a instrumentalist (Miliband, 1973) or a structuralist perspective (Poulantzas, 1971). The general Marxist answer to the question of who governs? Would be that the bourgeoisie rules but does not govern. A classic Marxist approach exists at the transnational level. Leslie Sklair shows that an emerging transnational capitalist class challenges the power of the states and is beginning to act as a transnational dominant class in some spheres and cooperates to overcome the contradictions inherent to a global consumerist capitalism (Sklair, 2001). A sociological debate has discussed the existence of such a class (Carrol and Carson, 2003)(Godelier, 2005)(Robinson and Harris, 2000) and evidences the transnational nature of the corporate elite (Kentor, 2004)(Wagner, 2005). However, the

transnational historical materialist tradition in International Relations denies the *a priori* existence of a unified transnational capitalist class and use the concept of elites clubs, or planning groups, to describe the ongoing process of class formation among globalising elites (van der Pijl, 1984). Transnational historical materialists use the term elites because a global capitalist class would only exist if it had a far greater level of cohesion and shared ideas and values than these elites actually have. In this view, global governance is a form of domination by a small-sized globalised and unequally unified elite linked with transnationally mobile capital over the majority of the people that lacks the capacity to act transnationally.

The classical pluralist/elitist debate of political sociology has thus been reformulated to study power in a context of globalisation. The two main visions remain the pluralist and the Marxist ones. However, these approaches are not completely satisfying and could be usefully challenged by non-marxist elitism in the same way they had been challenged by Wright Mills' non-marxist elitism at the national level. First, pluralism fails to acknowledge the power differentials among actors and confuses participation with actual influence. The wide variety of actors that are involved in transnational governance processes do not prevent a small minority of actors to be dominant in their respective area of influence. The theory of democratisation of world politics is thus not proven. As for the Marxist view, the analysis of a more or less unified transnational capitalist class tends to be too abstract and universalising and remains an economicist perspective. While it is true that economic capital offers a structural power in the different areas of world politics, there are important differences among sectors. Some actors are influential not because of their economic capital but thanks to their expertise or political power. If economic capital is a global source of power, there are many others, sometimes limited to a single issue-area or geographical territory. By drawing on Wright Mills and Bourdieu, the next section will try to explore a non-marxist, differentiated elitist view that could be useful to study power in a context of globalisation while challenging the liberal-Marxist debate.

3. Applying Wright Mills' power elite to a transnational political field

In order to apply the concept of power elite to a transnational political field, the concept of power elite as used by Wright Mills will be defined and translated to a concept of world politics. This concept of power elite will be combined with the concept of field to locate the power of the elite in a non-territorial transnational social space.

The concept of elites stems from a large literature on the sociology of elites. Elites are individuals and groups holding power in a particular social field (Scott, 2008; pp. 27-28). The notion of elites also assumes a distinction between elites and masses in a process of inclusion-exclusion. The main division between the elite theorists is the distinction between elite and elites. The use of the singular presupposes a cohesion and flow as in the ruling elite that the various specialized elites can be considered as part of a single elite. The use of the plural does not presuppose such a cohesion or simply rejects it. The idea of a unified elite, the ruling class, is found in Marxist literature. According to other critical approaches, such as that of Wright Mills, this unity is the result of a process that the researcher must analyse. It does not automatically follow a dominant position in the relations of production and vary chronologically as well as from one sector to another. The exercise of power by structurally dominant actors is not obvious (Knafo, 2010). It is based on consensus-building and the institutionalization of power after a struggle between different actors. There is no pre-existing global elite before the formation of a political struggle that imposes its power from its structurally dominant position. The elite, if it emerges, is a unification of different groups of powerful actors through a political process. This view, as we have seen, is a rejection of the existence of a transnational capitalist class (Sklair, 2001) or a global elite in the singular (Carrol and Fennema, 2002).

Wright Mills (2000) in his classical research on the power elite in the United States shows that separate and sometimes competing elites may, in certain historical contexts, unite around a common project that can in turn be imposed on society in general. First, Mills identifies three sources of power personified by the three most important types of specialized elite: the military elite, the business elite and the political elite. Mills clearly makes a difference between these elites and does not presuppose cohesion between them. They are each composed of independent persons at the head of their respective institutions. He rejects the Marxist concept of class that implies a dominant political domination of the economic elite. Despite this analytical distinction, Mills shows empirically that the cohesion of the elite in terms of interests and perceptions, and the circulation between specialised elites were such that one could speak of a relatively unified power elite in American society after World War II.

The concept of power elite and the methodological tools developed by Mills may be particularly useful for a study of change in the forms of governance of the global political economy. Indeed, the hybridization between the private authority and the public authority is primarily implemented at the elites level, both nationally and transnationally (Cutler, 1999; p. 203). Transnational elites in the plural, can be recruited from the private sector as well as from the national bureaucracy, be composed of experts from universities as business leaders. Transnational elites are groups of individuals acting in a network across national borders in a given domain and having sufficient power to ensure a dominant position in the politics of this area. This definition allows us to study these new forms of governance identified by the critical approaches of International Political Economy while focusing the analysis on groups of individuals and their interactions. It also allows a empirical analysis of the emergence of a dominant group in a particular issue-area, how it evolves and how it is contested.

The rejection of the existence of a global elite or a transnational capitalist class is based on the idea that the complexity of world politics excludes the participation of the same group of actors within different areas of world politics. The International Panel on Climate Change and the major transnational oil companies have a very indirect influence on changes in the governance of global telecommunications. This leads Cerny to propose a transnational neopluralism as an alternative to the idea of a transnational capitalist class (Cerny, 2010). He claims that the diversity of actors and areas precludes the existence of such a unified class and introduces pluralism in world politics. However, this vision might legitimize the domination of world politics by a few groups of players by stressing the pluralistic dimension of these new forms of governance and by minimizing the deep inequality of such private regimes.

One way to apply a differentiation of transnational policy areas while maintaining a critical perspective on the global dynamics can be the introduction of the concept of field as developed by Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1993)(Bourdieu, 2000)Defined as a relatively autonomous social activity (Kauppi, 2003; p. 778), the concept of field can contribute to address the universalizing tendency of critical theories and help study the complexity and heterogeneity of global politics. A field is structured by a set of general and specific rules and sets the issues at stakes and only discernible to the actors aware of the rules specific to the field. For example it is difficult to understand the logic of the art market without knowing the codes that rule it. Similarly, the issue of Internet governance is barely debated beyond the groups of actors operating inside this field. For example, it is interesting that the issue of privacy on the Internet is an important issue of human rights for some non-governmental organizations specialized in Internet governance while few "generalist" civil society organizations seize the issue of privacy.

The critical dimension of policy analysis is present in the field analysis since it is primarily a site of struggle between agents and institutions to obtain legitimate violence (specific authority) in the field (Bourdieu, 1993; pp. 77-78). Like in the case of Wright Mills, the concept of field was developed within a national framework. However, the concept of field seems particularly appropriate for studying transnational spaces defined socially rather than territorially (Kauppi, 2003)(Leander, 2007)(Frédéric and Pouliot, 2007).

Despite its specificity, the field is not completely isolated from the rest of society. It is also subject to general structural dynamics. The concept allows for a detailed study of specific dynamics, but the relations between fields and the translation of forms of power (or forms of capital) is however considered. Applying the concept of field in Internet governance is useful to analyse both the specificity of the actors, norms and issues of the field, while connecting it to the transversal dynamics of the global political economy.

4. Actors of Internet governance in the 1990s. From a pluralist to an elitist perspective

The use of concepts of power and elite field allows a critical view of Internet governance in a debate largely dominated by liberal approaches. Much of the literature on Internet governance takes up the idea of a new form of governance more democratic generated by technological advances in information and communication. Proponents of these approaches are generally committed themselves in the process of Internet governance as the Working Group on Internet Governance mandated by the United Nations to define Internet governance and imagine its implementation, the Forum for Internet Governance, born of the aforementioned process, and the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers. These authors developed a theory of multiple partners (multistakeholderism), rooted in the liberal approach, which allows them to describe pluralism prevailing in the arena of Internet regulation, to justify it theoretically as a democratization of global governance, and to establish it as a model for other areas of international politics. The idea of the existence of a power elite, i.e. the lack of real pluralism in the governance of the Internet, contradicts the notion of multistakeholderism. The empirical evidence of ideological cohesion and interests between different groups of individuals involved in Internet governance and a movement of these same individuals within the various institutions and partners in the governance of the Internet would undermine the liberal idea of the democratization of global governance. Starting from the same acknowledgement of the opening of the negotiations arena to non-state actors, the study of the power elite brings a different view of multistakeholderism and contributes to the critical study of private authority in world politics.

A critical approach in terms of field allows a dialogue with the dominant liberal approaches studying Internet governance as an object again, and especially independent. Many critical approaches to information society and the telecommunications industry are studying the general development of capitalism, including to an information economy or a cognitive capitalism, and see in the governance of the Internet a simple illustration of the global dynamics (Sum, 2003). It is indeed difficult to study the governance of the Internet as an isolated phenomenon and such a study might, such as liberal approaches, to deny the power relations between established players in the global political economy. However, it is useful to recognize a relative autonomy in the governance of the Internet. As noted above, some actors and some issues are specific to the field. The study of these characteristics of the governance of the Internet makes it possible to fit into the emerging disciplinary field of Internet governance and to provide a critique of liberal approaches to conclusions that are not disqualified by its structuralist or too generic and impertinent to the disciplinary field.

In the last few years, Internet governance has attracted a growing attention from an interdisciplinary

scholarship. It has been described as an emerging academic field (DeNardis, 2011). To remain with Bourdieu, each field has a *doxa* and this one's *doxa* is a strong faith in the democratising potential of multistakeholderism. The theoretical/normative lenses adopted by the mainstream literature on Internet governance have led to the creation of a multistakeholder mythology of Internet governance. The emergence of Internet governance as a political issue can be traced back to the 1990s. The main source on the emergence of Internet governance is Milton Mueller's *Ruling the Root* (Mueller, 2002). Mueller analyses the process as a competition between different interest groups: the various stakeholders. According to Mueller, there were eleven stakeholders in Internet governance that participated in the debate of the 1990s (Mueller, 2002; table 8.1). All of them had clear and expressed interests. The creation of a new governance regime resulted from the debate between these stakeholders. While Mueller acknowledges the victory of a dominant coalition in the negotiations, the multistakeholder view emphasises the plurality of interests and the openness of the political arena. This view tend to present on an equal footing actors that have very different resources. The trademark and intellectual property interests and the large telecommunications corporations are presented as actors comparable to the civil society and civil liberties organisations. This approach remains the dominant view of Internet politics even if the categories differ from one author to another (Mathiason, 2008). The first politicisation of Internet governance occurred in 1995 when the growing Internet commercial potential was beginning to be acknowledged. The Internet was a technology that was interesting to many but that remained an academic experiment. In September 1995, the National Science Foundation authorised covering for Internet domains. Suddenly, with commercial use of the Internet being allowed, the number of users skyrocketing and the first signs of business possibilities, it became important to know who controlled the Internet. "Who is in charge of the root ?" was the first issue of political economy linked with the Internet technology. The root is the basic and centralised space for Internet domain names and Internet Protocol addresses. Control over the root became an issue that mobilised many actors that joined the debates on Internet governance and gave rise to a number of other issues linked with the domain name system. From a US-centred debate, the stakes became rapidly global, involving international organisations, governments, private sectors and civil society organisations from different parts of the world. Between 1995 to 1998, the Domain Name System war created and consolidated a transnational policy field of Internet governance. The pluralist view describes a debate organised around two main initaitves: one by the so-called technical community and the other one by the U.S governement. The insitutionalisation of Internet governance that resulted from this debate is a consensus built on the basis of these two initiatives, with the input of other actors such as the leading Internet domain name registrar and other telecommunications companies and intergovernmental organisation such as the World Intellectual Property Organisation.

The pluralist view underestimates the connections of the actors beyond their stakeholder group. If we stick to the description of the two processes, there seems to be a clear-cut ditinction between the main stakeholders. The different documents produced during the politicisation of Internet governance have different natures. On the one hand, the technical community produced their documents, first on their own and then by including some other stakeholders. On the other hand, the U.S government produced their documents through a more classical political process. At the end, a consensus was found in the documents that created the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers by including most of the stakeholders and reconciliating the two leading stakeholders (see table 2). The documents have different authors and the resulting consensus include directly or indirectly all of the key stakeholders.

Table 2: The multistakeholder view of Internet governance in the 1990s (participation of the main stakeholders to Internet governance documents)

Stakeholder	Date	Technical community	U.S government	Network solutions	Trademark holders
Draft Postel	August 1996	X	-	-	-
gTLD-MoU	February 1997	X	-	-	X
White Paper	June 1998	-	X	-	X
ICANN bylaws	November 1998	X	X	X	X

However, a closer look at this process could tell something different. If we make a network analysis including the actors of Internet governance in the 1990s, not only the main authors but also the influential commentators[2] and if we look at the institutional affiliation of the individuals, we can see many links between the actors and the stakeholder categorisation becomes blurred. The two-mode network including this information is closely connected (figure 1) and the distinction between the two political processes is unclear.

Figure 1: The network of actors and institutions of Internet governance in the 1990s[3]

---
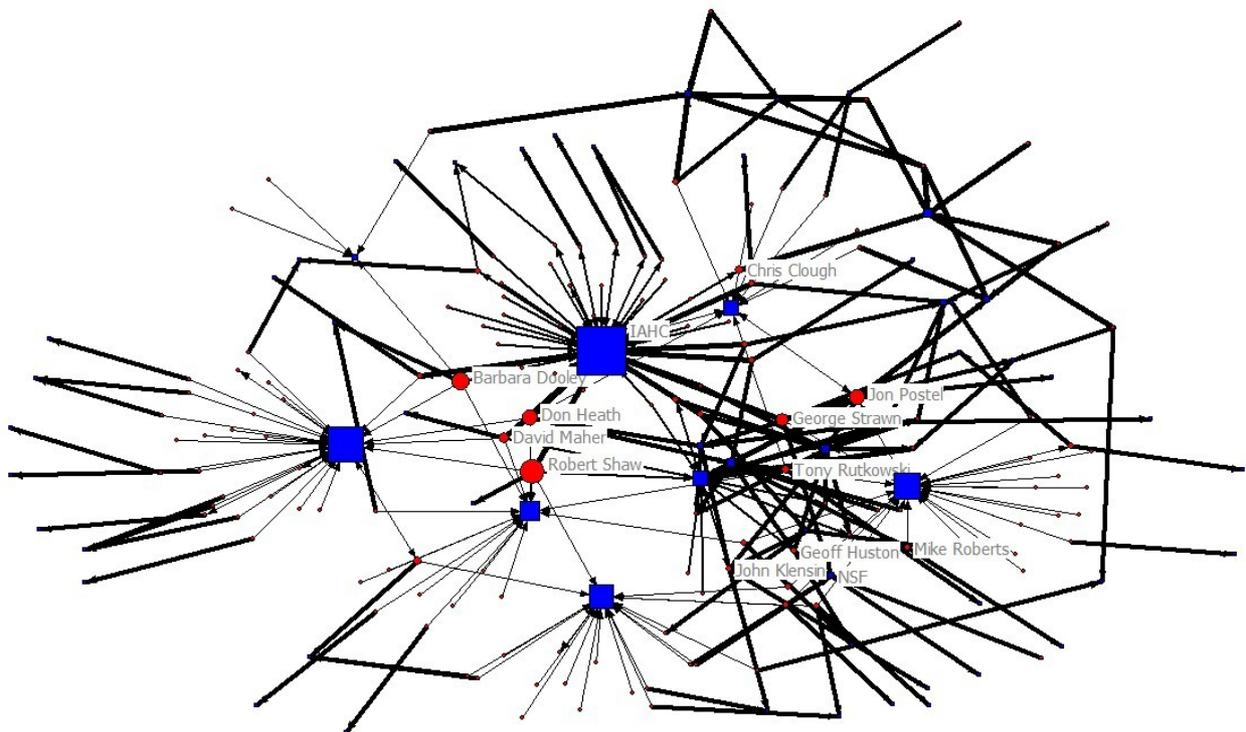
2 Influential commentators are people that commented draft versions of the documents and whose views were included in the final document. A exhaustive list is not available since some comments were not public but many comments were public and are archived on-line.

3 Circles represent actors and squares represent insitutions, document and events to which the actors took part. The size of the node is determined by the betweeness degree of the node. This network analysis is still incomplete but shows the relative cohesion of the field and the importance of some actors and institutions.

Finally, we can put aside the documents and the institutions to focus on the interpersonal relationships in order to evidence the link between individuals from alledgedly different interest groups. That is what figure 2 is doing. Figure 2 is a transformation of a two-mode network (that links people with documents and institutions) into a one-mode network that shows the links between individuals themselves based on the links implied by the particpation of two individuals in the authorship of the same document and the membership of the same institution. The links between individuals are strong and go beyond the stakeholder group. This shows a far greater level of linkages than the one described by pluralist approaches (see figure 3). A power elite can be singled out at the center of the network, including the most connected actors.

Figure 3: The network of actors of Internet governance in the 1990s[4]
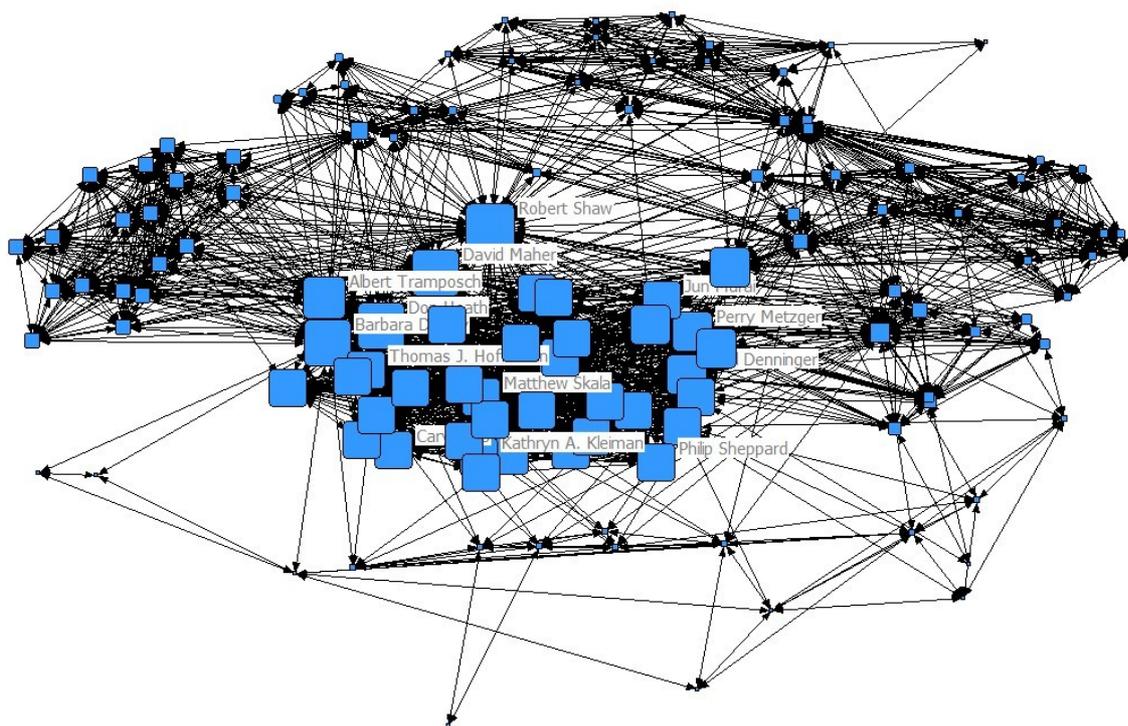
The linkages evidenced at a general level by the network analysis of the Internet governance debate of the 1990s can be precised by some more precise example of multiple-hat phenomenon and circulation among institutions. Some actors were in a position that allowed them to broker between groups of actors. The most famous example is Jon Postel. Jon Postel was in charge of the allocation of domains names and Internet Protocol addresses until the reform of the system. He was one of the senior IT specialists involved in the development of the Internet and a founding member of the Internet Society and of the Internet Architecture Board (Cerf, 1998). As such, his voice was very influential among the so-called technical community. He had worked on government research projects, especially on Internet's ancestor ARPANET since he was a graduate student (Postel, 1997). Jon Postel had strong contacts within the U.S administration. He was not a harsh critique of the document issued by the U.S administration and publicly expressed his support. He was later able to co-author the bylaws of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers with Don Telage, CEO of the monopolistic commercial registrar of Internet domain and former "ennemy" NSI (ICANN, 1998). Don Telage and Jon Postel served at the same time in the bozard of the

---

4   Every node is an individual actor. The size of the node is determined by the eigenvector of the node. The distinction between stakeholders does not make sense according to this network.

American Registry for Internet Names. Even more important was the role of Postel's close friend Vinton Cerf, also a senior networking specialist and co-inventor of the TCP/IP protocol suite that is the technical basis of the Internet (Abbate, 1999). Vinton Cerf was also involved in the governmental networking projects financed by the U.S department of defence (Abbate, 1999). But he was also vice-president of technology strategy at MCI (later MCI-Worldcom), one of the major telecommunications company in the United States and, in 1998, worked directly for the Global Internet Project, the business lobby involved in Internet governance issues (Mueller, 2002; section 8.1.2). Vinton Cerf was also a founding member of the Internet Society and served as its chair from 1992 to 2001[5]. He became a board member for the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers from 2000 to 2007[6]. Cerf is now a Chief internet Evangelsit at Google[7] and is a board member of the American Registry for Internet Numbers[8]. Like Postel and Cerf, many members of the so-called technical community were closely linked to the U.S administration and the private sector. The stakeholder view is not able to analyse these links and their significance for the plurality of interests and ideas about Internet governance. If we look closer at the links between the different actors of Internet governance, they are not only work relations, common attendance to one or the other conference. What we witness here is a multiple-hat phenomenon; Actors that are commonly believed to represent interests of the technical community are actually representing interests from transational companies such as MCI-Worldcom and IBM. The examples of chronological circulation among different type of actors is even more frequent. The specialised expertise in Internet governance is valuable for all kind of actors. For example, Esther Dyson, the first chair of the ICANN board was an entrepreneur, the head of a civil liberty organisation (the Electronic Frontier Foundation) and a journalist specialised in Internet issues. The classification of an actor in one or the other stakeholder category is arbitrary or at least historically unstable.

5. The power elite of Internet governance

The connections among different actors evidenced in the former section can be theoretically described as the emergence of a power elite of Internet governance. This concept allows us to grasp the history of Internet governance with a different look and can help understand the institutionalisation of Internet governance in the 1990s as the institutionalisation of a particular field within a more general context.

The debates on the allocation of Internet domain names and Internet Protocol addresses in the 1990s led to the creation of what I defined earlier as a transnational power elite. The political process was not a competition among diverging interests and world views. It was a process of inclusion-exclusion that defined which actors were going to be part of the power elite of Internet governance. The heart of the power elite is to be found in the U.S around some elite technical experts, a few key institutions of the U.S government, especially in the department of commerce, the leading telecommunications companies and some Internet early entrepreneurs. This emerging power elite had to cope with the vast majority of the private sector who were only interested in the protection of trademarks and some influential law firms and integrated these actors. On a transnational/international level, some big transnational companies, especially form Europe and Japan, as well as some powerful governments were able to weigh in the debates. The European Commission, the OECD and the WIPO were the key intergovernmental organisations whose employees participated in the creation of a transnational power elite of Internet governance. This emerging elite was unified around a project described in the various documents published during he debates and especially the Bylaws of the newly-created ICANN. The idea behind this project is the creation of a new, loosely-regulated market for Internet domain names. This lucrative market was to

---

5   See http://www.isoc.org/isoc/general/trustees/board.php, last accessed 5 August 2011.
6   See http://www.icann.org/en/general/board.html, last accessed 5 August 2011.
7   See http://www.google.com/press/pressrel/vintcerf.html, last accessed 5 August 2011.
8   See http://www.arin.net/about_us/bot.html, last accessed 5 August 2011.

be free from state regulation and from international oversight, except for a strong protection of intellectual property rights of the big transnational firms. The matter was treated as a technical issue, that had few political and social consequences. As such, the ICANN had a technical mandate and was led by the technical authorities.

The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers is only one institution among others that takes part in the governance of the network. However, it is the institutions that better illustrates the result of the political struggles of the 1990s. The ICANN represents the institutionalisation of the power of the transnational elite of Internet governance. The structure of the ICANN shows the elitist tendency of the institution despite the claims of an open and participative system. Mueller (2002; section 8.2.3) despite his description of a pluralist process reaches the conclusion of an institution captured from the start by the dominant actors. A list of board members was first drafted by an IBM lobbyist with suggestions from Postel and his lawyer, the European Commission and the Australian government. The project was criticised by the public, especially for the elitist character of the board election[9]. The emerging power elite had to include a participatory aspect to its project in order to get public support. Upon governmental demand, the ICANN board accepted to implement at-large elections to elect new board members. But after just one occurrence, the election was abandoned to carry on with the elitist system imagined by the power elite. Even if some authors, like Mueller and some non-U. S authors, are rather critical of the governance regime imagined in the 1990s debate, few of them use from the start an elitist analysis and criticise the regime from a problem-solving perspective by arguing that participation and openness can be improved. The ICANN structure is the result of an elite formation process in a new transnational policy field. As such, it is not a structure that lacks some democratic characteristics, it is the institutionalisation of the power if an elite and the co-optation of resistance. The election of very critical board member such as the hacker and member of the Chaos Computer Club Andy Mueller-Maguhn[10] did not lead to the transformation of the structure but rather to the renouncement of the most critical members and the co-optation of less critical ones.

If some of the actors analysed in this paper have relevance only on the field of Internet governance, some have the capacity to span fields and originally come from other related fields. This is where the logic of the field is influenced by the general context of the global political economy. The elite networking experts and arguably IT companies such as IBM or Bull had been aware of the economic potential of the Internet. The particular status that they had acquired in the field of Internet governance is due to their experience and specific expertise. However, the governmental actors and the big businesses that also became influential in the field of Internet governance acquired their power in other fields and were able to translate it into the specific field of Internet governance. The trademark holders whose lobbying changed drastically the fate of the governance system were holders of a great economic power and were able to shape the new market to their advantage. When the original project by Jon Postel considered the creation of hundreds of top-level domain (such as .com and .org), the number was reduced gradually to 5,3 and finally no new top-level domain. This was because the trademark holders were afraid by the difficulty to protect their trademarks outside the already huge .com database. The U.S government and the European Commission used their political legitimacy and power to influence the negotiations. From the national and international political fields, they had a strong position that they were able to use in another, private, arena. The field of intergovernmental organisations favoured the World Intellectual Property Organisation and the OECD over the ITU and UNESCO. These dominant players in their field became important players in the new field of Internet governance while the others struggled to be included. The power elite of Internet governance is, in turn, now in a position to penetrate other

---

9   Public comments available at
    http://www.ntia.doc.gov/legacy/ntiahome/domainname/proposals/comments/comments.html, last accessed on 5 August 2011.
10 See his statement of policy at http://www.trend.infopartisan.net/trd1200/t421200.html, last accessed 5 August 2011.

fields and to shape the debates that include some Internet-related aspects. The e-G8 of Deauville last May is an example of this power and ability to span fields since the negotiations model was slightly changed to fit the requirement of the Internet governance elite[11].

6. Conclusions: The complexity of world politics and power elites

While most of the literature on Internet governance is anchored in a liberal/pluralist tradition, the governance system institutionalised in the 1990s evidences the domination of an elite. The adoption of an elitist perspective based on the concepts developed by Wright Mills and Bourdieu allows a critical and empirical understanding of the creation of a transnational field of Internet governance and the emergence of the elite that still dominates it. The analysis of the connections between the different actors of the field shows that the multistakeholder view is an unstable and blurred classification. The actors do not belong to a well-defined group with specific ideas and interests but are rather members of a network of experts, businessmen, lawyers and politicians specialised in Internet governance and related fields. These actor met on many occasions, worked together and were members of the same institutions. They were thus able to build a project for the governance of the Internet that could be later imposed on other non-dominant actors. Some biographical data on some key actors further demonstrate the importance of these connections. The creation of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers was not a pluralist project that failed to include all participants but an elitist project that succeed in the co-optation of non-dominant actors. A transnational power elite of Internet governance emerged in the 1990s as a result of the debates that led to the institutionalisation of the field.

This specific case of an elite dominating one specific field of world politics hints towards an elitist understanding of world politics in general. Yet, it does not prove the existence of a single and unified power elite at the global level nor the domination of the world political economy by a transnational capitalist class. There is still much to theorise about the link between specialised power elites and elitism at the global level. While some authors argue that the complexity of world politics prevent the existence of an elitism at the global level (Cerny, 2010), the ability of powerful actors to span fields and to enter the debates on Internet governance as dominant actors without prior involvement has to be analysed. Indeed, the big trademark holders that were not present at the beginning of the debates on Internet governance, as well as lawyers and institutions specialised in intellectual property, were able to impose their views on the management of Internet domain names. Their power in the political economy in general, their organisation as powerful lobbies in the U.S allowed them to challenge the views of some more experienced actors. This is where the structural power of capital transcends the specialised fields and exercise its influence. Just like Wright Mills was criticised by Marxists for its lack of a general theory of power and domination (Barrow, 2007), a purely empirical and specialised analysis of a single policy field does not fully explore the domination of world politics by powerful actors.

A way to include the structural power dynamics that transcend fields without loosing the differentiation and complexity implied by the notion of field is present in Bourdieu's theory. The notion of a field of power could also be translated at the global power to study the dynamics that are common to many specialised fields. The field of power is the place where dominant actors in their specific fields struggle over the power to dictate "the dominant principle of domination" (Bourdieu, 1998; p. 265). The domination of neoliberal ideas that has been evidenced in the field of Internet governance is a general tendency of world politics in the 1990s. The power of trademark holders over smaller entrepreneurs or civil society organisations is also to be found at a more general level. This is why the study of Internet governance is only a case-study of elitism in world politics. The

---

11 See the op-ed by the Internet Governance Caucus, a civil society organisation involved in Internet governance demanding a multistakeholder summit in Le Monde : Izumi Aizu and Jermy Malcolm, « Monsieur Sarkozy, osez un eG8 forum multipartite », Le Monde, 24 May 2011.

use of Wright Mills and Bourdieu is not a renunciation of a more general approach to elitism in world politics. It is a differentiated approach to the domination of specialised elites in specialised fields that in turn struggle in a transnational field of power.

References

Abbate J., (1999) *Inventing the Internet*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA and London.

Alvarez J. (2000) Multilateralism and its discontents. *European Journal of International Law* **11**, 393-411.

Barrow C. W. (2007) Plain Marxists, Sophisticated Marxists, and C. Wright Mills' The Power Elite. *Science \& Society* **71**, 400-430.

Boli J. and George M. T. (1997) World Culture in the World Polity. *American Sociological Review* **62**, 171-190.

Bourdieu P., (1993) *Sociology in Question*. Sage, London.

Bourdieu P., (1998) *The State Nobility*. Polity Press, Cambridge.

Bourdieu P., (2000) *Propos Sur Le Champ Politique*. Presses Universitaires de Lyon, Lyon.

Carrol W. K. and Carson C. (2003) The network of global corporations and elite policy groups: a structure for transnational capitalist class formation?. *Global Networks* **3**, 29-57.

Carrol W. K. and Fennema M. (2002) Is There a Transnational Business Community?. *International Sociology* **17**, 393-419.

Cerf V. (1998) I Remember IANA, RFC 2468, IETF.

Cerny P. G., (2010) *Rethinking World Politics. A Theory of Transnational Neopluralism*. Oxford University Press, New York, NY.

Cox R. W. (1981) Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory. *Millenium: Journal of International Studies* **10**, 126-155.

Cox R. W. (1992) Multilateralism and World Order. *Review of International S* **18**, 161-180.

Cutler A. C. (**1999**). *Private Authority in International Trade Relations: The Case of Maritime Transport*. In: Cutler C. A., Haufler V. and Porter T. (Ed.), *Private Authority and International Affairs*, Stat.

Dahl R. A., (1961) *Who governs ? democracy and Power in an American City*. Yale University Press, New Haven.

Dahl R. A. (1978) Pluralism Revisited. *Comparative Politics* **10**, 191-203.

DeNardis L. (**2011**). *The Emerging field of Internet governance*. In: Dutton W. (Ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Internet Studies*, Oxford University Press.

Drake, W., (2009). *Introduction: The Distributed Architecture of Network Global Governance*. In: Drake W. J. and Wilson III E. J. (Ed.), *Governing Global Electronic Networks. International*

Perspectives on Policy and Power, MIT Press.

Drezner D. W. (2004) The Global Governance of the Internet: Bringing the State Back In. *Political Science Quarterly* **119**, 477-498(22).

Dryzek J. S. (1999) Transnational Democracy. *The Journal of Political Philosophy* **7**, 30-51.

Frédéric M. and Pouliot V. (2007) Le monde de Pierre Bourdieu: Eléments pour une théorie sociale des relations internationales. *Manuscript* , .

Godelier E. (2005) Les Elites managériales entre logiques nationales endogènes et globalisation exogène. *Entreprises et Histoire* , 6-14.

Groupe de travail sur la gouvernance de l'Internet (2005), *Rapport final*, Organisation des Nations Unies.

Hirst P., Thompson G. and Bromley S., (2009) *Globalization in question*. Polity, Cambridge.

ICANN (1998) Bylaws for Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers. A california Nonprofit Public-Benefit Corporation. , .

Kauppi N. (2003) Bourdieu's Political Sociology and the Politics of European Intergration. *Theory and Society* **32**, 775-789.

Keck M. and Sikkink K., (1998) *Activists beyond borders: Advocacy networks in international politics*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.

Kentor Jeffrey Jang Y. S. (2004) Yes, There is a (Growing) Transnational Business Community: A Study of Global Interlocking Directorates 1983 - 1998. *International Sociology* **19**, 355-368.

Keohane R. and Nye J., (1972) *Transnational relations and world politics*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.

Keohane R. O. and Nye J. S., (2000) *Power and Interdependence*. Longman, Londres.

Knafo S. (2010) Critical approaches and the legacy of the agent/structure debate in international relations. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* **23**, 493-516.

Leander A. (2007) The "Realpolitik of Reason": Thinking International Relations through Fields, Habitus and Practice. *Copenhagen Business School. Department of Intercultural Communication and Management* , .

Marx K. and Engels F. (**1969**). *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. In: (Ed.), *Marx/Engels Selected Works*, Progress Publishers.

Mathiason J., (2008) *Internet Governance. The new frontier of global institutions*. Routledge, Londres.

McGrew A. (**2002**). *Transnational Democracy: Theories and Prospects*. In: Stokes G. and Carter A. (Ed.), *Democratic Theory Today: Challenges for the 21st Century*, Polity.

Miliband R., (1973) *L'Etat dans la société capitaliste. Analyse du système de pouvoir occidental*. Francois Maspero, Paris.

Mueller M., (2002) *Ruling the root: Internet governance and the taming of cyberspace*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

van der Pijl K., (1984) *The Making of an Atlantic Ruling Class*. Verso, London.

Postel J. (1997) Internet Domain Names Part 1. , .

Poulantzas N., (1971) *Pouvoir politique et classes sociales*. F. Maspero, Paris.

Rioux M. (**2005**). *La gouvernance globale. Les défis institutionnels de l globalisation*. In: Rioux M. (Ed.), *Globalisation et pouvoir des entreprises*, Athéna.

Risse-Kappen T., (1995) *Bringing transnational relations back in: Non-state actors, domestic structures and international institutions*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Robinson W. I. and Harris J. (2000) Towards A Global Ruling Class? Globalization and the Transnational Capitalist Class. *Science \& Society* **64**, .

Scott J. (2008) *Modes of Power and the Re-conceptualization of Elites*. In: Savage M. and Williams K. (Ed.), *Remembering Elites*, Blackwell.

Sklair L., (2001) *The Transnational Capitalist Class*. Blackwell, Oxford/Malden, MA.

Sum N.-L. (2003) Informational Capitalism and U.S Economic Hegemony: Resistance and Adaptations in East Asia. *Critical Asian Studies* **35**, 373-398.

Wagner A.-C. (2005) Les Elites mangériales de la mondialisation: angles d'approche et catégories d'analyse. *Entreprises et Histoire* , 15-23.

Waltz K., (1979) *Theory of international politics*. McGraw-Hill New York, .

Wright Mills C., (2000) *The Power Elite*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

ANNEX 1: THE INTERNET ECOSYSTEM[12]
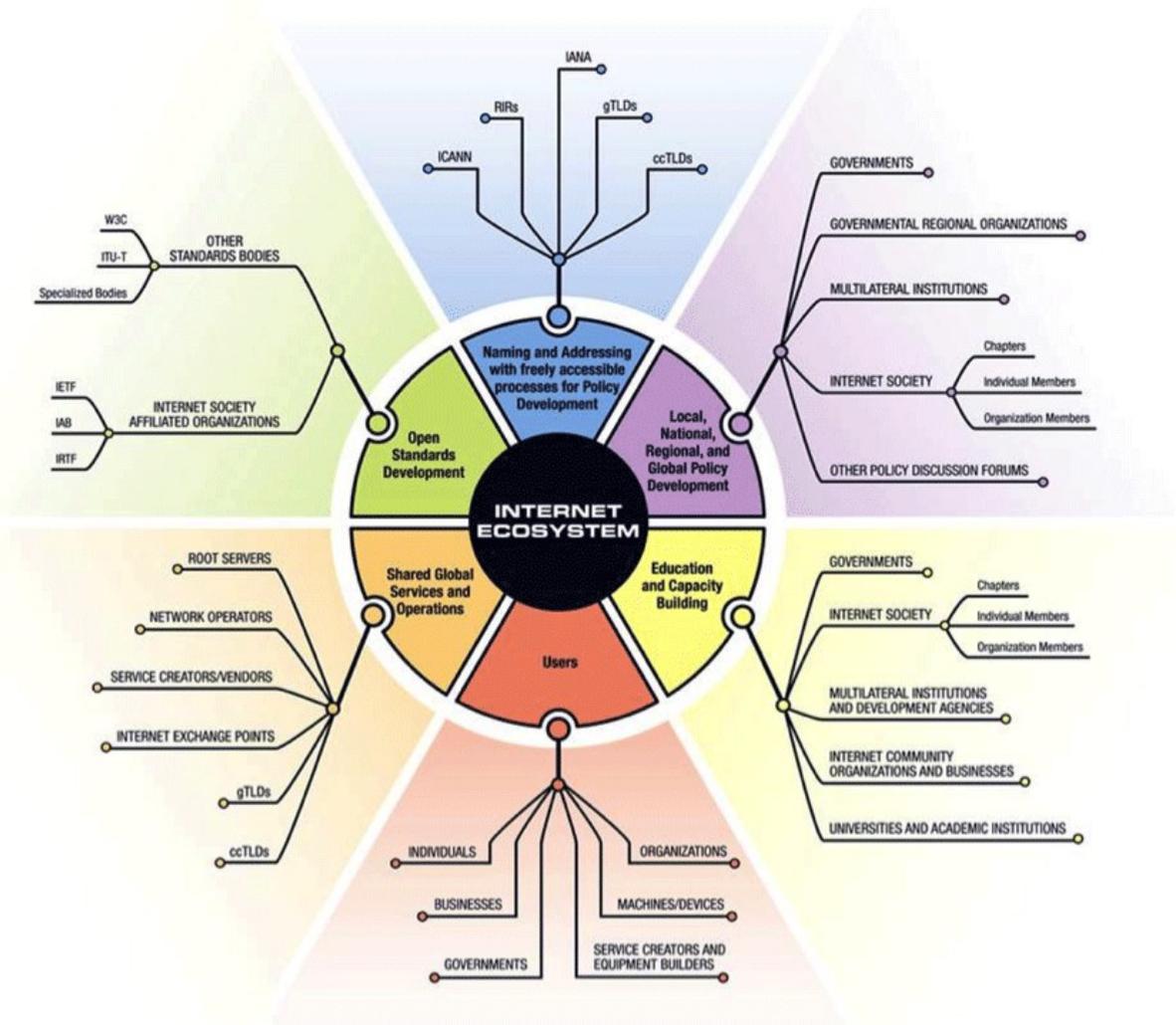
12 Available at http://www.isoc.org/pubpolpillar/img/ecosystem_big.png , last accessed 5 August 2011.