

Explaining Internet Governance to Friends and Family 101: How to Improve Our Communication?

Final report and outcomes of the workshop

March 2018

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12th Internet Governance Forum
Workshop 161
December 2017

<https://igf2017.sched.com/event/CTsT>



IGF Internet
Governance
Forum

IGF
GENEVA  2017

Acknowledgments

This workshop would not have been possible without the support and assistance of our three external breakout group leaders, **Daniel O'Maley**, **Jennifer Chung**, and **Dennys Antonialli**, as well as our official session reporter, **Mark Datysgeld**, the GIP Digital Watch observatory just-in-time reporter, **Krishna Kumar Rajamannar**, and **Beatriz Kira** for taking notes during the school engagement breakout session. We would also like to thank **Anja Gengo** from the IGF Secretariat for all of her support and assistance, and to all those individuals who helped us disseminate the pre-IGF survey, including **Sandra Hoferichter** (EuroDIG) and **Lynn St. Amour** (IGF MAG chair). Many thanks also should go to the dedicated individuals who attended our session and so kindly contributed to the discussions that ultimately built this report. Lastly, a big thank you to **Monica** from Caption First transcription services for ensuring we could revisit the suggestions we received.

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Overview

“Explaining Internet Governance to Friends and Family 101: How to Improve our Communication?” was a workshop held during the 12th Internet Governance Forum (IGF)¹ in Geneva, Switzerland, on 20 December 2017.² The session aimed to bring together different stakeholders who are working in positions and fields that communicate Internet governance (IG) issues to the public in order to identify better practices and new ways of telling engaging stories on the matter. In addition, it sought to provide a platform for further cooperation and the exchange of ideas between various stakeholders.³

The workshop consisted of two parts:

1. A pre-workshop survey targeting both Internet governance professionals and the general public; and
2. Robust, facilitated, in-depth, breakout group discussions held in person at the IGF meant to explore some of the relevant themes highlighted by the survey and offer more granular suggestions and feedback.

The survey aimed to gather information on the existing practices and challenges, and to investigate how the general public understands Internet governance-related topics in order to form a basis of discussion for the IGF session. This report offers key findings from that survey supported by the breakout group discussions held, along with recommendations and ideas for future exploration of this topic.⁴

Note: if any researcher, organization, communications team, or other party is interested in conducting follow-up research, please contact us at: mike.oghia@gmail.com in order to discuss the results and our methodology.

¹ For more information, see: <http://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/>.

² Video and transcript available at: <https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/content/igf-2017-day-3-room-xxvi-ws161-explaining-internet-governance-to-friends-family-101-how-to>.

³ The GIP Digital Watch report (DiploFoundation) is available at: <https://dig.watch/sessions/explaining-internet-governance-friends-and-family-101-how-improve-our-communication-ws161>.

⁴ For a condensed version of the results, see the presentation slides: https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1pa_oKlpePcMdOW1nyywwWSpbOD23lsZsFFZTEvntTkY/edit?usp=sharing.

Introduction & background

For those who work on Internet policy, talking about Internet governance is part of our daily professional routine. Yet, when we move the discussion outside of the community and into our routine spheres of life, it can often be difficult to explain it and/or difficult to comprehend. As such, the impact of the topics on someone's life who is not involved in Internet governance processes tends to be less clear. How many of our parents and friends can explain what we do to someone else, for instance?

Since the IGF is a multistakeholder platform that facilitates the discussion of public policy issues pertaining to the Internet, it is important to discuss how we approach those individuals who are not as familiar with Internet policy or involved in the matter – especially if they are end users themselves – and also how to receive more and better attention from the media regarding topics that affect Internet users worldwide. Even though in cases such as the Snowden revelations the attention to the importance of the Internet was more prominent, generally speaking, Internet policy issues are not well understood by people outside the Internet governance ecosystem. This is particularly important as National and Regional IGF Initiatives (NRIs) expand and grow. More often, non-traditional stakeholders and individual actors will be engaged, many for the first time, and ensuring they understand Internet governance along with its jargon and language is critical. This also relates to the availability of content relevant to their local context and in local languages, as well as technical matters such as Universal Acceptance,⁵ especially as Internet policy increasingly diffuses into more mainstream media coverage and everyday conversation. This is particularly relevant since there have been few, if any, concerted efforts to address this topic more systematically within the IGF in particular or within other Internet governance fora in general.

As such, it is clear that individuals and stakeholders invested in Internet governance must work to better ensure policy discussions are clear, while also ensuring processes are inclusive and communicable to wider audiences. This not only will be to the benefit of journalists covering such events, the general public, and those supporting Internet governance processes, but also help individuals and professional engaged in this space to better convey the work that is being done across the Internet governance ecosystem.

⁵ See: <https://www.icann.org/resources/pages/universal-acceptance-2012-02-25-en>.

Pre-workshop survey results

Methodological note

The survey instrument consisted of a 29-item questionnaire created via Google Forms⁶ and disseminated over email and social media channels. The questionnaire was divided into two sections: Part I contained 24 questions that gaged how the respondent's friends, family, and non-professional communities perceive their Internet governance-related work, while Part II consisted of five demographic questions. The questions were mainly multiple-choice questions, but also included three open-ended questions – two related to the content of the questionnaire, and another about the questionnaire itself.

The questionnaire opened on 9 October 2017, and closed on 10 December 2017. It was shared on the personal social media channels of the three organizers (Agustina Callegari, Michael J. Oghia, and Jelena Ozegović), as well as multiple email lists relevant to the IGF and wider Internet governance community.⁷ Additionally, all data collected is confidential and safely stored, but the respondents did have the option to write their email address in order to receive a copy of the results; thus, it is not fully anonymous.

There are also limitations to this survey. First and foremost is that it was designed as a non-academic study meant to explore themes for the in-person IGF session, so all results are not meant to be scientific or representative of the entire Internet governance community, but instead point to areas for future study and development. Moreover, our questionnaire included at least one double-barreled question that some respondents highlighted as problematic in the questionnaire feedback section.

Survey demographics

The questionnaire received a total of 171 responses from across the Internet governance community. All of the IGF's recognized stakeholder groups are represented⁸ – where 100 (58.5%) participants indicated they were part of either civil society or academia. A total of 88 (51.8%) of the respondents indicated they were male, while 75 (44.1%) said they were female and 7 (4.1%) preferred not to say. Most of the respondents have been involved in Internet governance for at least one year, with 34 (19.9%) indicating they have been active for 1-2 years, 59 (34.5%) indicating they have been active for 3-5 years, 30 (17.5%) indicating they have been active for 6-10 years, and 33 (19%) indicating they have been active more than 10 years.

⁶ The form was available at: <https://goo.gl/forms/OYHAY2zd3LTK3m0o2>. For the list of questions, see: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Vi5ksLjZu4ZbIDA-vM79Olz5svg8HHb/view?usp=sharing>.

⁷ The list of email lists used to disseminate the questionnaire is available at: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1XtU7fCi9Xb-n8SdBQd5EWO54ZN6qyCH4eXmwt2E933s/edit?usp=sharing>.

⁸ The stakeholder groups are: government (including intergovernmental organizations), the private sector, civil society, and the technical community (where academia is divided between civil society and the technical community).

Key findings: Part I

Overall, 112 **(65.5%)** respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that sometimes it is hard to explain what kind of work they do to others, while 104 **(60.9%)** either agreed or strongly agreed that it is difficult to talk to people about Internet governance who are not part of the IG community, and 81 **(47.4%)** either agreed or strongly agreed that they often have trouble describing Internet governance in ways that people will understand.

A total of 74 **(43%)** respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the complex nature of Internet governance makes it difficult to describe in languages other than English. Most notably, though, 131 **(76.6%)** either agreed or strongly agreed that they sometimes wish it were easier to describe Internet governance to others.

When asked about how easy or difficult is it to explain their involvement with Internet governance, 104 **(60.8%)** respondents indicated they experience some degree of difficulty explaining it to **friends**, while 130 **(76%)** indicated they experience some degree of difficulty explaining it to **family members**, and 133 **(77.8%)** indicated they experience some degree of difficulty explaining it to members of their **non-professional community**, such as neighbors.

When asked to mark certain statements that may or may not reflect their experience describing Internet governance to others, two statements received the most significant responses. A total of 102 **(60.4%)** respondents agreed that, “When talking to friends, my mom says that I ‘do something with the Internet,’” while 87 **(51.5%)** agreed that, “I often use an analogy or simplify what Internet governance is (e.g., “I work in telecommunications,” or “I work on social media”).”

The respondents also responded to questions about the outreach and communicational efforts of IG organizations and initiatives, including:

1. 134 **(78.4%)** either agreed or strongly agreed that schools on Internet governance (SIGs) are an effective way to learn about IG.
2. 129 **(75.5%)** either agreed or strongly agreed that they are creating great explanatory and educational content, but it is not promoted enough.
3. 122 **(71.4%)** either agreed or strongly agreed that they are doing a good job in attracting newcomers, but that process needs improvement.
4. 83 **(48.5%)** either agreed or strongly disagreed that the language they use is too technical and overly complicated.

5. 123 (71.9%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed that their outreach activities are attracting a sufficient number of newcomers on a yearly basis, so there is no need for improving the communication.
6. 85 (49.7%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed that, since Internet governance is a specific niche, the interested audiences will find the way of understanding it even without outreach and promotional activities per se.

Key findings: Part II

The questionnaire posed two open-ended questions to respondents, which offered them the chance to give more detailed feedback:

- How might Internet governance be communicated more effectively?
- How could IG actors and stakeholders better engage with those who are unfamiliar with our jargon and language?

Each question received 128 and 127 responses, respectively, which amounted to nearly three-quarters of the respondents answering the open-ended questions. The results of both questions were examined and combined into four interrelated themes that reflected the various feedback received (in order to better facilitate and focus discussion at the IGF workshop):

1. Creating analogies and using simple language (e.g., avoiding acronyms and jargon);
2. Tailoring to target groups: focus on diversity, inclusion, and new stakeholders;
3. Engaging with academia, universities, and schools; and
4. Expanding capacity building and mentoring newcomers.

The raw data is freely available online (without identifying information),⁹ but examples of statements that directly relate to the activities of communications professionals are listed in Table 1 on the next page.

⁹ See: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Dbw2aeHORyjBleFqIz7wisyPNRzVBbTU/view?usp=sharing>.

Table 1: Select open-ended question responses

Analogies & language	Target groups
<p>“IG needs to be made more relatable to the common person. They need to see exactly why it is important and how they can contribute in a way that actually has an impact.”</p>	<p>“Localizing and contextualizing the debates and discussions. This will need local partners that need to be chosen wisely, and sustained engagement is needed for effective change.”</p>
<p>“Simplify into stories that may be of their interest. This means to build entry topics like you and privacy, you and Uber/Airbnb, etc.”</p>	<p>“With examples, and to targeted audiences, like IT students, law students. Engage journalists to act as [conveyers] of information. Not everybody will be aware/need/like IG, but if this targeted audiences can be reached, at least the interested can be directed to [an] SIG, online courses, or even to [apply for] scholarships to a local, regional or global IGF [events].”</p>
<p>“Don’t use acronyms (or explain them) or catchphrases. Speak the language of those we are talking to; host discussions at local community centres (like libraries) on specific topics that affect the community. Take it local!</p>	<p>“More concrete examples are needed (what are the policy changes / new initiatives / impact?) so people understand the importance of IG and can relate how their participation will shape the IG / contribute to IG development.”</p>
<p>“I do not believe language and jargon are the problem. The problem is interest. How do you engage someone’s interest long enough to explain this to them. Why should they care? How does it / will it affect them?”</p>	<p>“I don’t think all the IG acronyms / their language is a big burden. It’s more the not understanding of *why* the Internet can/should be governed internationally.”</p>
<p>“Material being developed for different categories of people in different languages and promotion beyond the usual networks and circuits.”</p>	<p>“The ideal way is to break the complex issue into smaller nuggets of knowledge and explaining then in simple works often referring to your listener’s experience. Trying to find out what aspects of IG might be the most interesting to them (social, legal, or economic) and concentrating on discussing them.”</p>

<p>“I think more should be invested in the design and layout (as well as proofreading and even writing!) of material – e.g., output products/documents from the IGF. People like reading content that is well-designed much more than a simple MS Word document, for instance. Similarly, graphics and infographics could also be useful if suitable for the content at hand (infographics don’t work for all content).”</p>	<p>“[You posited:] “I* organizations are creating great explanatory and educational content, but it’s not promoted enough” No, they are not creating great explanatory and educational content, and they are not promoting what they have enough. More materials are needed. Basic guides, starting with how the Internet works, particularly notions of openness.”</p>
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School engagement	Mentoring & training
<p>“Through the regular education starting from primary school.”</p>	<p>“Take the time to talk. I managed to convince my 9-year-old grand nephew that IG mattered, and today, as he is launching a business in rural Missouri. He has already put up a website to communicate with prospective customers and promote his business, so he often now asks me questions about [the] security and resiliency of the Internet. Take the time to explain it is NOT Facebook or Google, or Twitter – but that such social media applications rely on the Internet and its connectivity and openness. Make it your priority to demystify and be an evangelist, not just with your family, but with governmental contacts, not only in the telecom Ministry, but in the Health and Education Ministries, etc.”</p>
<p>“With forums in universities, schools in order to explain [to] new people what Internet governance is.”</p>	<p>“I’ll take a wild guess that listening to all voices in Internet governance and communicating it will never work if we don’t take diversity serious. Being able to respect and communicate with anyone only comes from understanding each other and working together.”</p>
<p>You need to target high school kids, and get the[m] interested. [Ask:] “Why should they care?”</p>	<p>“Work with the local actors. Use the local actors to engage with universities (for IT-related careers, law careers among the first), [and] keep supporting the local IGF initiatives, both with sponsorship, and global speakers.”</p>

IGF session report

The IGF workshop itself attracted approximately 32 participants in total where the gender balance in the room consisted of 18 males and 14 females. Michael greeted the attendees, introduced co-organizer Jelena, and mentioned co-organizer Agustina, who participated remotely. Michael explained the survey the organizers designed and circulated in the previous months about the difficulties of explaining Internet governance to others, and mentioned his personal experiences on the matter.

Building on this, Jelena and Michael presented the results, including that 171 people filled out the questionnaire, and then discussed the positive and negative feedback received about it. They said the importance of the breakout discussions outlined in the session agenda lies in understanding the challenges, better structuring the theme, and analyzing where the problems lie. Jelena introduced herself and how hard it is to explain her role working at a country code top-level domain (ccTLD) administrator to others. They went over statistics about the participants of the survey, highlighting data about the people who answered it, and that the spread of the participation was good, with much gender, age, and stakeholder diversity.

Jelena then explained how there would be four working breakout groups focused on different themes that were raised in the results of the survey (at that point, some people left the room in response to learning of the breakout session model, and almost all of those were from a seemingly older demography). The four groups were divided as follows:

Breakout group topic	Facilitator	Organization	Total participants
Analogies	Daniel O'Maley	CIMA	12
Target groups	Jennifer Chung	DotAsia	6
School engagement	Dennys Antonialli	Internet Lab	8
Mentoring & capacity building	Jelena Ozegović	RNIDS	6

Daniel handled the creation of analogies and the simplification of language; Jennifer was responsible for tailoring to groups (diversity); Dennys was responsible for outreach to academia and engagement with schools; and Jelena focused on capacity building and mentoring newcomers. Daniel's group on analogies and simplification was the one that drew the most attention, attracting twice as many people as the others. Each facilitator was also offered an envelope with every open-ended comment from the questionnaire pertaining to their breakout group topic. Participants were offered the opportunity to change groups as much as they wanted, but that did not happen. Once committed to a group, they remained. Some interesting questions and discussion points that were raised included:

- Why do institutions not prioritize older people more when it comes to engagement and offering funding?

- Government and the media seem to stick out as sectors that have a hard time understanding and communicating in terms of the Internet.
- The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) and its outreach programs (such as ICANN Learn¹⁰), as well as some iconic ICANN figures, were often mentioned as important across the four breakout groups.
- Additionally, there was an overall feeling that there was not enough time to discuss questions with such a broad discussion scope.

¹⁰ See: <https://learn.icann.org/>.

Breakout group discussion feedback & recommendations

Breakout group I: Analogies

The discussion group on analogies reported that the key to simplifying Internet governance language and jargon includes creating analogies that are accurate, and also providing simpler definitions of IG. Some of the analogies raised included:

- The Internet is like water. So, if poison enters the water, the entire system is corrupted.
- An urban planning-themed analogy: if a street needs to be repaired, you call the mayor's office. But if the Internet is broken, whom do you call? Think about the city as a data flow.
- The analogy of using blockchain as a system of counting.
- An architecture-themed analogy similar to the urban planning one: the fact that its structures and rules are still being built, which also describes the way Internet governance is evolving.¹¹
- Thinking about climate change as another all-encompassing topic that has global implications but local ramifications as a way to talk about global governance in general, but IG in particular.

The group also stressed that there is tension between breaking IG down into smaller bits of digestible information. An example includes trying to explain net neutrality, for instance, with analogies versus recognizing that the Internet is interconnected, and if you make one change in one place, it is going to affect other things as well. At other times and with other issues, maintaining a holistic perspective is more advantageous, such as with cybersecurity. A key was always making sure it is relatable to the target audience, which includes incorporating examples people are familiar with or individuals whom they can imagine. Lastly, also connecting it to basic human rights or other values that they share can be an effective way to communicate IG.

Breakout group II: Target groups

The discussion group on target groups reported that, methodologically speaking and given their small group size, they preferred to go through comments handed out by the organizers, and arrange them based on the following categories: relevance, local content, regional and global collaboration, capacity building, diversity, and new channels and methods. Standout suggestions picked by the group included:

¹¹ Similar to how DiploFoundation has illustrated the evolution of Internet governance: <https://diplo.smugmug.com/ILLUSTRATIONS/Internet-Governance/Building-Under-Construction/Building-under-construction/>.

1. Increase the relevance of communication to target audiences;
2. The need for more global society inclusion and not just enclosed circles/silos, which includes welcoming newcomers;
3. The use of less abstraction when discussing IG, which also includes incorporating more practical examples that are more relevant to the targeted person or targeted people in their daily lives;
4. Create local content using local languages, which is key to promoting engagement and outreach, as well as make it easier for local communities to understand and learn about Internet governance; and
5. Promote multilingualism and diversity vis-à-vis content creation.

Breakout group III: School engagement

The discussion group on school engagement reported that, when it comes to engagement with schools and academia, it was suggested that Internet governance be made part of the curriculum for students in primary schools, high schools, and universities. Implementing this suggestion locally or globally, however, would require trainers and political and bureaucratic support. In this case, making use of the existing professors, lecturers, and staff networks to teach Internet governance was suggested. The group also suggested that governments should be encouraged to play a key role in creating programs for the public to be informed and to learn about Internet governance.¹² Other stakeholders and organizations such as the Internet Society (ISOC) and ICANN were identified as being able to play a key role alongside government as well. Overall, they raised a number of key points, including:

- Should there be Internet governance courses offered in educational environments? There was a consensus that yes, it should.
- Should those be mandatory or optional? Integrated into subjects or their own class?
- How can we provide better outreach to university professors, to convince them that Internet governance is important, and discern the courses in which it should be taught (e.g., if every person at a university should be aware of IG, or whether it is specific to certain disciplines and courses)?

¹² For more information, see the breakout group discussion notes at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1mhlEzKahj8RusPiNFtS0rKPTscinGjfB/view?usp=sharing>.

- It was noted that recommending this as a subject for global learning might overlap with other more pressing issues in some countries in general, or even more basic challenges such as schools in underserved and developing areas limited or no access to the Internet.
- How should organizations build capacity for those who also build capacity (e.g., train the trainers)?

Breakout group IV: Mentoring & capacity building

The discussion group on mentoring and capacity building reported that online courses already exist and are deployed. ISOC and ICANN, for instance, have those resources, so people can start from those resources.¹³ Yet, the promotion of already existing coursework on Internet governance was also identified as a necessary step. Each community and type of person, regardless of their experience level, stakeholder group, or geographic region, needs their own kind of mentorship. Tailored programs should reinforce this for a variety of newcomers as well, regardless of age in particular. Hence, personalization of programmes based on geography, gender, age, and education was suggested. It was stressed that one-to-one communication with experienced members of the community is very important to development as well, and peer motivation and mentoring are also advantageous and necessary. Additionally, the role of mentors in shaping the interest and participation of a newcomer was strongly emphasized. Newcomers will be motivated to learn and not be intimidated by Internet governance if a personal mentor guides them. Mentors could also reach out to communities and local regions to get more people to participate in Internet governance.

¹³ For a guide to getting involved in and learning more about Internet governance, see: <https://www.cima.ned.org/blog/getting-involved-in-internet-governance-a-quick-guide/>.

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